Flash! Fiction 3

by Peter McMillan
with Adam Mac

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The 37 stories, vignettes, and apocryphal tales contained in this anthology are reprints of Peter McMillan's and Adam Mac's flash fiction that has been published on the Internet.

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally.

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For Otto

Table of Contents

The Hidden Job Market 1
The Writer Who Had to Write Big 5
The Efficiency Ombudsman 7
Back to the Start 11
Nanobits 12
The Outlet 13
Ceteris Paribus 16
Supply and Demand 18
Dry Land 21
A Drifter's Tale 22
Hindsight 26
A Christmas Dinner Tableau 29
The Recluse 31
It Was Really Nothing 34
Splitting the Lottery 36
Evensteven 38
Bear Country 42
The Game 46
The Doctor's Office 52
I Definitely Need That 55
Going My Way? 58
Excuse Me, You Seem to Have Fallen Asleep on My Shoulder 62
The Reading Room 64
I Couldn't Help Overhearing 66
Can't Get It Outta My Head 71
The Box 75

The End 77
A Suitable Man of the People..... 80
Skin-Deep 83
Milt, Mo, and the Money Machine 87
Stories by Adam Mac..... 90
The Dissertation..... 91
The Escape..... 94
Improvisation..... 98
The Recruit 101
In the Beginning We Did Have Someone on the Ground..... 105
Real Estate 108
Revolting Characters 112

The Ad

The ad said “whether you make $1 a day or $1 million a day, don't waste time job hunting with anyone else.”

That’s an eye-catching claim, but it makes you wonder what edge they have on Bertrand Halperin and Associates, the long-time anchor of the back-end of the classified section.

This will be a good test for my new portfolio.

The Office

The office is smartly furnished. The building is old, but it’s well-maintained, so it can pass for faux ancien chic.

Bobby, the receptionist, is attractive, professional and polite, but after the introductions and the call to Robert, her attention turns to a tanning and fitness salon brochure.

Robert—pronounced with a French accent and thus no “t” sound at the end—runs the show. He is not French at all, but he does seem fond of hearing his name called. Robert is very smartly dressed, almost as if he and the office were designed together.

Bob is the third in the trio. He’s the guy that can make you look young and sober. Bob is also the guy that makes things happen. He’s the coach, the critic, the advisor, etc.

The Pitch

Robert makes the pitch. It's a $3,000 6-month program using a patented methodology for résumé development, interview feedback and leveraging the hidden job market.

The hidden job market—that's Robert's theme, and it has been apparent from the moment I walked into the office suite. Bobby hadn't said much, but a conspicuous part of her introduction was a recitation of the fact that 80 percent of all jobs are hidden. And during my brief tour of the office with Robert, I met Bob, who claimed, with rehearsed precision, that 85 percent of the job market is in the hidden job market. I noted the discrepancy, but let it pass.

Now, Robert expands upon the hidden job market theme. It is the only way to go, he says, which is why it is the focus and the specialty of the firm. The approach has been so successful that patented material is guarded like a trade secret. Only clients who have signed non-disclosure agreements have access.

Robert clinches it when he concludes an already captivating presentation by insisting that *fully 95 percent of all available jobs never show up* in newspapers, trade magazines, corporate websites, online job banks, coin laundry bulletin boards, you name it. That figure, he says, is based on proprietary market research that is shared with clients. It includes a secondary hidden job market that has long remained untapped within the more familiar primary hidden job market. Again Robert emphasizes that once prospects become clients, they also become shareholders to whom the mysteries of the proprietary and confidential business model are unveiled.

What an extraordinary pitch—and pitchman! I'm intrigued by this marketing of the secondary hidden job market and wonder whether Robert is aware that I already have access to it.

Robert is certainly impressed with my credentials and my references and even goes so far as to express his regrets for not having an opening in the firm—a senior position reporting to directly to him. Never know when a vacancy will pop up though, he says. Quite right, I add.

The Plan

As Robert changes over to talk about administrative matters, I recognize that this is going to be perfect. A more timely and plausible pyramid scheme just can't be found. One or two things need to fall in place first, so I'll buy some time. I assure Robert that I'm interested—more than he can imagine—but that I need a day to move some—er—funds around.

We agree to a late morning meeting on the following day.

Walking through the revolving door and out into the busy sidewalk, I spot the coffee shop where I'll hang out until Bob leaves the office. I choose a seat at the counter facing the window, directly opposite the old building with the revolving door. From here, I can observe the comings and goings without attracting attention.

I am convinced that Robert was telling me that the job was mine as long as I made the necessary arrangements. What about Bob? Well, no job's permanent, and like Robert said, you never know when a vacancy might pop up. In the hidden job market, you have to be prepared for anything, at anytime.
As I drink my coffee and skim through the classifieds, my eyes are drawn to an ad that reads "Identity portfolio enhancements—

passports, name changes, credit histories, work credentials, references—arrange for a free and confidential consultation.” The phone number looks familiar. I reach for my cell phone, punch in the numbers and wait. It’s Bobby! My god! How could they have known? And how could they be so upfront as to give their real phone number? The identity shop that I went to was a back-alley, basement operation, but these guys are operating right out in the open in the middle of the financial district.

There's Bob, but it doesn’t matter now. There are no hidden jobs in this pyramid.

First published in Danse Macabre du Jour, November 25, 2013.

Some writers write about the small, the everyday, the ordinary, and, turning it over and over and looking at it from all sides, the good ones turn up something never before seen in precisely that light.

Christopher couldn't tolerate the banal, however artistically finessed. He had to have the big theme, larger than life, steeped in history and suggestive of the future.

He should have been a novelist, but he was afflicted with a genius that grew bored very, very quickly. So, he wrote flash fiction – fleeting bursts of the imagination compressed into a short story that can be fully digested in 3-5 minutes.

His friends were polite but curious when they asked how he could write about epic themes in only slightly more detail than haiku. Of course, they never asked him directly. They always asked one another, rhetorically.

From an early age, Christopher was fascinated by the transcending. That's the one thing that he enjoyed so much about his religious lessons as a young boy. Religion introduced him to the infinite, and this liberated him from the common and the boring repetition of things and people and places.

Gaining entry was difficult and inexplicable. However, it was impossible for Christopher to navigate through the infinite. He simply yielded to the infinite. Although it was blasphemous, some even maintained that no one had ever mastered the infinite. But that was a large part of the attraction for Christopher—an infinite that got larger the farther you got into it.

Christopher was not a scholar. He didn't have the attentiveness for that kind of work. In a library he would sit quietly at a table for 20-30 minutes, then get up, walk around, look through the stacks and return to his table with another 10 or so books completely unrelated to what he'd been reading. This could go on for an entire afternoon or evening, and afterwards his table would be covered with towering, unsteady piles of books having no discernible theme uniting them.

Christopher wrote better than average. He wasn't a great writer, just like he was not a profound thinker or serious scholar. But he was still captivated by the larger than life. As he grew older and as the limits of life became more and more real to him, he began to reach out again for the world of the infinite that had mesmerized him as a youngster.

He began to write—big. He knew he couldn't capture it on the epic canvas of a great novel. He could only see glimpses of it, and sometimes he couldn't even describe it in words. Often what he wrote would seem to represent his insight, but then on hearing another's opinion, he would realize how miserably he failed.

Over the final years of his life, he wrote hundreds of pieces of flash fiction—finite sketches of the infinite. He never published them, and they were never published posthumously.

First published in Writers Haven Magazine, Issue 13, The Writer.

My 4th grade class decided that it wanted to go on a school field trip to see the Efficiency Ombudsman. Of course the range of options they were given was limited, and the Efficiency Ombudsman was the lesser evil. In other words, it was the last option given the thumbs down.

#

Our guide informs us that the Efficiency Ombudsman is the ultimate arbiter, or judge, in questions of efficiency, whether in the public or private sector. He is the efficiency expert par excellence and his technical credentials are unrivalled. He holds an MBA from Wharton, a law degree from Harvard, a medical degree from John Hopkins and an engineering degree from Cal Poly.

As part of our tour, we are allowed to read a sample of the emails that come across the ombudsman's desk. Unfortunately, we are bound to silence on the specifics, having been required to recite the ombudsman’s non-disclosure agreement “so help us God.”

However, I am permitted to say that the emails come from everywhere—people in manufacturing, distribution, transportation, public utilities, banks, credit unions, agriculture, government, schools, universities, hospitals, charities, churches, synagogues, mosques. It seems that everybody’s talking about efficiency, and they all seem to be converging on this one office. Most say they want more efficiency—greater output in goods/services with lower costs—and are petitioning the ombudsman to support them. However, there are a few who claim that efficiency, when pursued without regard to unintended consequences, can be harmful, and they petition the ombudsman to support them. Overall, the volume is extraordinary—somewhere in the tens of thousands, we are told.

Our guide apologizes as he explains that we will not be able to see how these emails are answered, since the process is quite complex and sensitive in terms of privacy issues. We do learn, however, that each incoming email must pass through a rigorous quality control check that may involve as many as six committees before a response can be researched, prepared, edited, translated, interpreted, logged, filed, and sent, requiring an additional eight committees.

I ask where all these people are accommodated, since I noticed in the lobby that the Efficiency Ombudsman only takes up one floor of the building. Our guide answers that virtually all committee work is done on-line. Then I ask how they manage a virtual office for such a complicated organization. He points ahead to the double doors on the left-hand side of the corridor.

He says "That's 'The Room.'"

I shrug my shoulders, and the kids look interested all of a sudden.

"That's where everything happens," he continues.

Again, I shrug, and the kids come closer, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

He speaks softly, "That's where the computer processes the request, simulates all possible responses and returns the most efficient response, based on a secret and complex probability calculation."

"So," I ask, "where do the committees come into play?"

"They're in the computer," he says.

"I don't understand, you mean they communicate on-line as if in conference?" I ask.

"Not quite," he says. "The committees are designed to operate inside the computer."

"Are there people inside the computer?" blurts out one of my students. "Cool," says another.

"Not in the way you're thinking," answers the guide. "Here, maybe this will help. Picture the computer as an efficiency calculator. It's a super-sophisticated calculator that adds, subtracts, multiplies and divides all kinds of things—not just numbers. But on the screen, it looks a lot like one of your video games. Everything that the computer needs to process and respond emails has been built into the program. There's a research committee, a writing committee, an editing committee, a translation committee, a community liaison committee, a public relations committee, and so forth."

"Wow," say several of the kids, almost in rhythm.

"Can we see it?" ask a couple of the starry-eyed math whizzes.
"No, I'm afraid not," says the guide as he motions us past the entrance and down the empty corridor. "You see, it's highly classified, and I've probably already said more than I should have. But remember, you promised not to tell?"

"We promised not to tell what we read in those emails," pipes up one of the youngsters.

"Actually," says the guide as he fishes into his jacket pocket for a piece of paper "what you recited at the beginning of the tour—here it is—covers the emails and anything else that is described as confidential."

“Hmmmph!” interjects the youngster, as if to say “So, that’s what you think, huh?”

As a parting gesture, the guide offers one last thing. “The computer” he says with a wink “is an incredibly versatile administrator. For example, it planned and coordinated in detail the Ombudsman's fishing trip this week off the coast of Baja California with the top executives of the ‘big five’ banks. And only moments before you arrived, it outfitted me with this tailored suit and silk necktie.

Another "Wow" from the audience, as I strain to keep my eyebrows level.

As we leave, we're each handed a complimentary magnet which reads "Efficiency Ombudsman.”

One of the children suddenly yells out "Hey, mine says 'Privacy Ombudsman,'" and our guide turns red in the face and helps me corral the students and guide them through the door and into the elevator lobby.

Out on the street, I tick off the children’s names as we load the bus. A flash of curiosity makes me reach inside the breast pocket of my jacket and pull out the magnet. I notice that “Efficiency” scratches off easily and underneath lay “Privacy.”

First published in the Eunoia Review, August 28, 2013.

"Go!"

"Get ready!"

"On your mark!"

"Runners to their places."

"Next is the 100 metres."

Alvin jogs off the infield track.

Six gurneys line up for the helicopter.

A flurry of white coats surrounds the sprinters.

The world's fastest runners lie fetus-like on the green.

Alvin needs one more win to break the last record.

First published in 50-Word Stories, October 28, 2013.

Today's paper had a peculiar addition to the classifieds – nanobits.

Very, very short obituaries for people on the go.

"Deceased, upward mobility, second-hand cradle, platinum cremation urn."

"Deceased, punctilious editor, donations to chastity [sic]."

"Deceased, corporate closer, PowerPoint slideshow graveside."

"Deceased, efficient administrator, no survivors."

"Deceased, protective shopkeeper, self-willed."

"Deceased, imminent threat."

"Deceased, reserved."

"Births—"

First published in 50-Word Stories, November 25-26, 28-29, 2013.

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Just off the interstate between Detroit and Toledo, you might see—if you look closely—a poorly marked exit to a modest-looking outlet. It isn't one of those sprawling villages of Nike, Gap, Liz Claiborne, Eddie Bauer, and Circuit City. It's a simple flat-roof, concrete block cube signed "THE OUTLET."

I've driven this route dozens of times and never noticed this exit, which is squeezed in between two larger and busier exits. I would have missed it again except that I happened to remember a conversation I had last fall with a young journeyman machinist from Grand Rapids named Dieter Knecht. Dieter caught a ride with me near the state line, and he asked if I could take him as far south as I was going. He was a talkative fellow.

He talked about this place where he had worked for a few weeks to make some cash before getting back on the road. It didn't look like much from outside, he said, but inside it was incredibly different and just incredible.

He described broad, well-lit corridors lined with storefronts, offices, and mysterious doors and connected by escalators and elevators to other levels and more corridors. There was no map of the facility, he said, but a custodian at the entrance would direct you wherever you wanted to go, and when you were done, you could tell him that you wanted to try something else.

Dieter claimed that it was impossible to exhaust all of the opportunities. But at some point you had to decide to stick with something for a while, he said, not so much because you found what you were looking for as that you suddenly craved something familiar.

At one point in our conversation, I recall thinking that Dieter sounded like a character from one of those *Steppenwolf* or *Magister Ludi* books my girlfriend was into pre-Woodstock, so I began to wonder just how strongly Dieter was drawn beyond the familiar.

He was too young to know that all this had been done before and that one day he, too, would be permanently sucked into the comfortably banal. I'd once been open and experimental but had long since succumbed to the pull of the everyday and the substantial. Now, I looked knowingly, but without jealously or regret, at myself 40 years younger.

#

The parking lot was half-full, but there was no one else around. Approaching the front door, I was struck by the stillness. No sounds came from inside the building either, and the solid steel door swung noiselessly.

This was not the great entrance that Dieter had prepared me for with portals leading off in every direction to unending chains of stores and shops and vendors and maybe even phenomenal, unreal, and psychedelic adventures.

It was an ordinary warehouse reception area with cheap industrial furniture—one desk and a couple of chairs, papers and binders haphazardly stacked on a rickety metal bookshelf beside a three-drawer filing cabinet that supported a dingy coffee maker and an out-of-date wall calendar. Except for the desk and its orbit, the room was bare.

A door, to the left of the bookshelf, was the only way in and the worn carpet showed the way. I sat down and waited for the care-

taker, but 15 minutes of unnerving quiet was long enough, so I got up to walk towards the door to find out where Dieter had sent me.

I opened the door with a slight push, and the sunlight rushed in to fill the rectangle of floor behind me, while in front of me the parking lot was still half-filled with cars, including mine. Only it was my red Opel with Cheryl's glass beads hanging from the rear-view mirror.

First published in Down in the Dirt, Volume 121, January/February 2014.

Drew was a smart kid. His sixth grade classmates thought he was a genius. In the lower grades, he was a legend perpetuated by his former teachers. But Drew wasn't impressed. It got him nothing but trouble. His friends had over time excluded him. Only the class bullies sought out his company.

His granddaddy, an old-timey farmer, had been smart, too—he died last year—but a different kind of smart. After chores sitting on the bank of the pond with their fishing poles angled over the water, the old man used to tell his stories. He didn't have a lot of them, Drew came to realize, so he repeated them changing things here and there to make it sound like he hadn't told them before.

Drew had overheard his folks talking about his granddaddy's stroke, about how the tractor had run into the ditch, its motor humming well past supper, about the restraints Doc Cuthbert had ordered for overnight sleeping. He wouldn't accept that the old man might have to go into a nursing home, so he arranged to sleep on a cot in the old man's room and each day pretended the old man was getting a little better.

When his granddaddy died, Drew was shaken to the center. He lost a friend and a storyteller, and he lost his connection to a larger world. The old man always ended his stories with a pithy aphorism that Drew would later turn over and over in his mind as he was doing his chores. They sounded original and fitting, almost like they had come from the Bible. Once in Sunday school—he hadn't yet started first grade—Drew made the preacher's wife laugh loudly when he said that Jesus fed the five thousand people on five loaves of bread and the two fishes that were too big for the small pond at the foot of the hill.

Drew's granddaddy had been an adventurer. As a young man, he had left home and gone searching for work and for something he couldn't describe. He rode the rails out of the cotton fields of south Alabama and through the endless pine forests of Mississippi, the swampy, bug- and reptile-filled bayous and the county-sized cattle ranches dotted with oil wells. On the other side of Albuquerque or was it Odessa, he'd run out of money and found work as a ranch hand and Indian fighter. He sailed out of San Francisco long before the bridge was built and made it as far as Guam, but when the war ended, he came back to Blue Springs.

Six years was a long time to wait, and to Drew it seemed like an eternity. Every day the school bus picked him up and dropped him off at the end of the narrow, red clay road that led uphill to the old farmhouse. The hours between bus rides seemed to get longer and longer, and days merged so that yesterday and tomorrow always seemed present.

With his granddaddy gone, he felt entirely alone, especially after he'd done his chores and sat quietly looking into the pond. Struggling through his emotions, he set about reconstructing his granddaddy's stories in all their variations. He remembered his granddaddy telling him about the underground spring shaded by a canopy of willows, near where he had grown up, that was so cold you didn't have to worry about water snakes. Drew was terrified of snakes—literally petrified whenever he saw one—and on the long hot days during the dry summer months, his daydreams would sometimes carry him away to the ice-cold swimming hole of his granddaddy's childhood.

First published in *Aardvark Press*, May 7, 2014.

"On the savannah, the lion outruns and slaughters–"

#

"That's it!" declares the exasperated teacher pushing the eject button. "I'm sorry class, but I just can't get past this point. I don't see anything, but there must be a scratch or something," she explains, inspecting the DVD with her thick bifocal lenses then turning to the class. "We'll end a few minutes early today," she announces setting off a great clatter of chairs and desks. "Don't forget your homework for tomorrow," she adds hurriedly, by now speaking to the back of the crush squeezing its way through the door.

#

Martin is an ordinary eight-year-old kid. He doesn't wear glasses. He dresses normally – nothing from the thrift store and none of that faux-hood clothing. His father just got a job in Toronto. It is mid-January, and he hasn't made any friends yet.

Walking home from school, he takes a short cut through the market district and runs into a gang of six toughs who beat him long enough to get warm, dumping him in a snow bank behind a dumpster in an alley.

#

The next day Martin is prepared. As expected six black leather jackets pile into the alley, from the front and from behind.

"Think you're a pretty tough kid, eh?" challenges the tallest and the apparent leader.

He'd reminded Martin of a friend back in Chicago who spoke the same way and carried himself with the same swagger. But there was one big difference. This kid – maybe 12 or 13 – had a single black eyebrow separating his forehead from the rest of his face. The other five kids wore the same eyebrow.

"Not really," responds Martin without any hesitation. "I know you can beat me to a pulp again, but I think I've got something better to offer. You can make a lot of money and still beat me to a pulp."

"C'mon, let's beat him to a pulp" says the eyebrow that must have been second in command.

"Shuddup, I'm thinkin" shouts the primo eyebrow. "OK kid, how's this gonna work?"

"Well, we gotta have an audience," Martin answers, bringing out some of the emphatic gestures he'd picked up in his old neighbourhood.

"Whoa! What? Whadya mean an audience? The cops'll be all over us," exclaims the head eyebrow.

"No," interjects Martin, "not just any audience. We want the high stakes voyeurs—uh—I mean, the people who prefer to watch, but not the crazy ones that go to the dog fights. We want those flabby old grandpas sick of playing cards and board games down at the centre but too afraid to do anything else."

"Awright," says the preeminent eyebrow. "Say we hook a few of these old geesers. Tell 'em there's a street fight and they can see it, up-close and personal and all hush-hush. Whadda we charge 'em?"

"A Benjamin—er—a c-note per head," answers Martin as he moves his lower jaw and left and right. "Can't do this forever, you know."

"How do we split the money?"

"I was thinking 50-50."

"Whadya mean? There are six of us. Besides we can beat you to a pulp any day."

"Yeah, but you can't always make money doing it. And what if I started taking a different way home? Or turned you in to the police?"

"OK then. We take two-thirds, and you get a third."

"How about 60-40? You get 60 and I get 40. That's ten bucks apiece for every head in the crowd."

"Don't play me for a fool! I get forty. They can split the rest. You and me – we go 40-40."

"You're a natural aren't you? Your old man must be proud. How 'bout we do this Friday at 3:30? Can you be ready?"

"Should be able to get the uncles and some of their pals."
"Make sure they don't talk, alright? I ain't going to the cops and I don't want your boys going all soft and soppy and giving the cops a heads-up, OK?

"Don't worry about me. You just be here when you said. And don't mess with me. If anything looks fishy we're outta here and you and me, we'll settle up later."

First published in Down in the Dirt, Volume 120, November/December 2013.

Even after the 30-foot surge had receded, dry land didn't seem as demarcated and safe from the ocean as it once had.

When the ocean withdrew, it revealed a horrendous tangle of houses and cars, utility poles and wires, street signs and billboards, and 100-year-old oak trees stood like naked giants, though some were variously decorated with metal and plastic and mechanical debris.

We had persuaded her to evacuate. Her son had stayed behind—on guard—and had watched as the flood entered and filled the house, twisting and squeezing it.

For the next two years, everything seemed to get sucked down in a muddy sludge. Everyone was affected. The supercenter sold anti-depressants by the pound.

Her house was not covered, the insurance company told her—not for this kind of damage—so her son restored it, put it on the market, and got enough to pay off the bank. Afterwards he went away—quietly.

In the beginning, she stayed with us for a while, but soon after her cancer was diagnosed, she was back and forth between the hospital and a long term acute care centre before she ended up here in the hospice.

Today for the first time in days, she has opened her blueberry eyes wide to the purdy-purdy-purdy of a cardinal singing in the park across the street.

First published in Postcard Shorts, September 12, 2013.

Two drifters huddled by their campfire, just down a piece from the railroad bed. Johnny, a scrawny, restless kid not more than 18, and Sam, a shrunken head on a lumbering, creaking six-foot-five-inch frame.

No more trains til morning, and this was a familiar stop, on the county line between two small towns. To the east was the sheriff neither wanted to tangle with again. A couple of years back, they'd been rousted out of an old widow's barn, robbed, bound in ropes, and dumped in a livestock car filled with hogs. The sheriff hadn't actually taken part, but he made no effort to discourage his boys.

Best to get on the other side of Calhoun County as quickly as possible. Tonight, on the county line, it was safe enough but still a good idea to keep the fire low and out of sight.

They were down to one can of beans. That was dinner and breakfast and probably lunch. There wouldn't be any more hunting til they got past the sheriff and his boys.

Overhead, the new moon made the stars stand out brilliantly against the blackness, and though it wasn't overly cold if you were sheltered from the wind, you still wanted a fire nearby to help you get to sleep, especially if you were under the weather like Sam was.

It was Johnny that saw it.

"See that, Sam? That's the first shootin star I seen since August— I think it was August. Must've been when we was comin into Oklahoma City."

"So what?" muttered Sam

"So, make a wish. You know. We always make a wish," said Johnny.

"You go right ahead, then. Makes no never mind to me," said Sam coughing, his joints popping as he lay down, his back to the fire.

"Sam? You know how we always make one single wish and it just about never comes true?"

Sam grunted.

"This time I'm gonna be real smart, Sam. I'm gonna get my wish cause I'm gonna wish I could wish forever."

"That's mighty clever, Johnny boy," said Sam with uncharacteristic sarcasm.

"Here goes. I wish I could wish forever and ever. Know what that means, don't you Sam? Now, I can wish for somethin, and in half an hour I can wish again, and I can keep on wishin tomorrow, and the day after ... until the day I die. Why don't you make a wish, Sam? I'll give you one of mine."

"If I do will you leave me in peace."

"Sure thing, Sam. Your wish is my command," said Johnny chuckling.

"Okay, I wish I had one of them great big Willy burgers we had back in Odessa and a pitcher of cold beer to wash it down. Even with this damned cold, I could go for one with all the fixins — onions, bacon, cheese, tomatoes, pickles, mustard, and that hot sauce. You re-

member, they're so big, no bun can hold em? Damn if I wouldn't be in hog heaven. I'd eat that thing in four bites and swill that beer in one go. Now ... look wacha gone and done, Johnny. Got me all hungry and ain't nothin round to eat. Now, leave me be."

#

"Sam! Sam! Look! It came true! Your wish. It came true! It's a miracle or somethin."

Sam raised his heavy lids and rolled over part way to see what Johnny was on about. Sam's eyes nearly sprang out of their sockets.

"Good God o'mighty! This cain't be real."

He sniffed, reached out to touch, then jumped up, kneeling in front of the plate Johnny had pushed over his way. Before Johnny could get in another word, Sam had licked the plate clean as a whistle.

"I wish you hadna done that, Sam. That was damn greedy."

After a thunderous belch that frightened a small animal out of hiding, Sam said, "You said you could wish for anythin you want anytime it suited you, so wacha need my wish for?"

"I guess you got a point, Sam. Wish I'd thought of that first," answered Johnny.

"Why don't you just wish up somethin for yourself?"

"Nah. I guess I kinda lost my appetite. Sam, I wish I could see things the way you do."

"Well, you lie down beside the fire and get some sleep, Johnny boy. You can wish us up a great big ole breakfast before the 5:50 comes through," said Sam.

"Wish I could."

"You're just nervous bout the sheriff and them boys. Don't fret none bout it. It'll be fine. In one of them boxcars, nobody'll ever see us," Sam said, lying back down.

"Wish you was right about that," answered Johnny. "Fact, I wish we never met them people to start with."

"You just keep on wishin, Johnny boy," whispered Sam re-positioning himself.

Johnny ran his finger around the inside of a the blackened can and tossed it back into the fire.

First published in *Dew on the Kudzu - A Southern Ezine*, July 21, 2013.

Street level in the financial district it was dark and the streetlights were still on. Overhead the sky was blue and sunlight glinted off the windows of the upper floors.

Seven o'clock in the morning used to mean a seat on the train all the way in. Now it's standing room only … if you're lucky. And in the train station, the concourse is packed from six on. By seven thirty the one-block walk to the subway is an achingly slow shuffle. One step, two steps, stop. Step back to let people into the food court. Step forward, reach for a door, push into the surge of bodies. Pass through the smokers' gauntlet. Walk through the next set of doors, down the cracked tile steps, carefully through the spinning turnstile and then off to the shortest escalator line-up.

At the office by eight, he rarely had time to himself anymore, because the rest of the management team was also coming in early, and like him they weren't going home any earlier. By eight he was fully engaged and he didn't stop until after one, when he and a few of the other managers went to a bar for lunch.

Meetings were booked solid through the day and micro-managed down to the scripts. He lectured and commanded his people. Among his peers in meetings, he was a team player. When summoned by the executive, he nodded on cue.

Sometimes by seven, like tonight, but usually before eight, unless it was end of quarter, meetings were wrapping up and cell phones were coming out to make or change appointments. Ritualistically, allowances were made for a round or two of decompression drinking at a bar on the way to the station.

But not tonight. He had an engagement with his wife. Thanks to her family's endowments over the years, they were members of the exclusive museum society and had been invited to a special preview. Though not the enthusiast his wife was, he was amenable as long as there were no crowds, pushing and shoving, no offensive odours, and absolutely no children.

The preview didn't start until 8:30, so when he phoned her he suggested they meet at the little Hungarian place around the corner behind the museum. The service there was polite and friendly—quaint—and the schnitzel and beer were good stout fare for a long evening.

Back at the museum in plenty of time, they were greeted by the director and the curator and then mingled with the other guests before proceeding to the exhibit.

The main hall, its ceiling also the roof of the four-story museum, swallowed the elite gathering. In the centre was what the curator described as a reconstruction of a royal burial structure, made entirely of stone in the shape of a pyramid with a flat top. Its back half was cross-sectioned to reveal a three-dimensional labyrinth and to reduce its base in proportion to its forty-foot height.

According to the curator, a self-described aficionado and autodidact of the architecture, a pyramid structure of this modest scale would have required a few thousand men working between five and ten years to construct, using the primitive tools of the period. A 14-hour day in temperatures above 40°C with limited fresh water and no shade was typical and that was on top of the daily two-hour ritual trek to the site and back.

The rest of the curator's remarks were directed to the phenomenal human engineering predating the Mesoamerican pyramids, the ex-

traordinary precision of the construction, the intricate underground network connecting the pyramidal structures on barren plains, and the deceptively simple form that disguised an infinitely complex and elaborate interior. The tour was an hour and a half, and at the conclusion, the consensus was that the exhibition would indeed vindicate the museum's decision to host this large and costly exhibition.

Afterward, he and his wife joined another couple for drinks and chatted about kids, college, vacation plans, retirement, and markets. The exhibit didn't come up. He and his wife shared a cab to the train station. He caught the train home and slept through his stop. She took the cab on to the airport for her flight to Beijing.

First published in Vending Machine Press, December 1, 2013.

The dining room was unevenly lighted. The two candelabra couldn't replace the immense chandelier that hung dark and silent overhead, and the wall sconces created more shadow than backlighting. The serving dishes were stationed on the sideboard. there were four empty chairs, but the settings were left in place ... just in case.

Henry sat at the head of the table as he had for 27 years. He couldn't feed himself since the stroke. His role was strictly formal. Only his wife, Eloise, knew about his hallucinated cuckoldry, though the accusations had nearly driven her to file for divorce. But Henry didn't let on about his other fantasy.

From the other end, Eloise presided over the table as she did with everything. She was not inclined towards business, preferring the gardens, the church and the children, in that order. However, she had proved exceedingly competent in handling Henry's business affairs, including the partnership that managed the family's land.

Henry's younger brother, Cecil, was a life-long bachelor and the dashing black sheep of the family, so it was with no little irony that he attended the Christmas dinner faithfully every year. Not having any legitimate heirs, his interests in the partnership were more immediate than his siblings.' However, without the support of one of them, he knew he'd never cash in fully from the land. Two nights a year he harbored at the family house and then was gone again.

Diagonally, across the table was Catherine, the eldest of the three, and her companion, this year a middle-aged but gorgeous Italian actress. Catherine's two children, both unmarried and in their late thirties, rarely came, neither expecting anything financial to materialize from yet another long, drawn out Christmas ceremony with the

ancient relatives. Catherine came, not for tradition, but to check up on the family and the land.

Henry and Eloise had two sons. Reginald was a local real estate broker, and Archie was a medical missionary in the Congo or thereabouts. Reginald actively followed and studied the goings on of the partnership as he happened to be professionally associated with its legal and financial advisors. Archie wrote once a year — his annual Christmas letter — but otherwise he wasn't heard from.

Harold and Elizabeth, Reginald's children, represented the third generation. Harold was studying law, in keeping with his father's long-range plans. Elizabeth, the apple of her grandfather's wayward eye, was a graduate student specializing in tropical diseases, who had more in common with her Uncle Archie than her father. Neither child took after or took to their alcoholic mother, who stumbled in at last and was escorted to her chair by Great Uncle Cecil.

With everyone seated and the servants standing at attention, Henry slurred through the Christmas benediction once again.

First published in *The Story Shack*, December 25, 2013.

Longing drove him out of the house for the first time in ... well, he couldn't remember. He lived alone, stayed home, had made arrangements for the groceries to be delivered and for the kid across the street to take out the trash and cut the grass.

Books, radio, and painting filled his days for many ... well, a long time. The windows in his upstairs garret afforded the best view for his palette, and whenever he was so inclined, he could listen to the radio to find out what was happening outside. At first that was all he needed.

Although he knew the current date, that didn't help him calculate the duration of his solitude. He'd forgot when it started, when he'd withdrawn. However long it had been going on, his isolation had become suffocating.

Behind the panes of glass and distanced by static radio broadcasts, he needed out of his aloneness. To see the trees again, the houses and people, up close. To smell flowers and perfume and even the paper mill. To feel the warmth of the sun and the embrace of the wind. To touch the sturdy metallic body of a car and the flesh of someone's hand.

He might've chosen to go out in broad daylight, but he had reservations — mostly fears. Too much too soon. The risk of failure and a devastating return to seclusion warranted a deliberate and gradual re-encounter. And so he ventured out in the middle of the night, in the middle of a great storm when he knew no one else would be about.

The cold rain and the gusting wind made themselves familiar right away. And the violent thunderclaps and jagged lightning bolts made

their re-acquaintance no less forcefully. Everything he'd come out to see and feel and breathe was overwhelmed by the storm, and he fled, back to the safety of his rooms.

He convinced himself that he hadn't failed, and in the following days, he debated whether to stick with the original plan of easing back into the world or pluck up the courage and jump in and swim in the fullness of experience that had grown so remote. He chose the latter.

The day he chose was bright and sunny and very warm, so he knew it would be busy, especially since it was near the noon hour. His house, set back from the road a bit, gave him a chance to take everything in slowly as he made his way down the stone path from the porch to the sidewalk.

A large pine had come down during the storm. Thankfully, the neighbor's fences were intact. They could be difficult — the neighbors, that is. A crotchety, old skinflint with the lungs of a mezzo soprano on one side and a snooty young couple, the woman with a DAR-birthright, on the other. Picking through the splintered and sappy debris of the old tree that had warned of its demise for years, he reached the front gate.

Out on the sidewalk, he turned and headed down toward Main Street. The clapboard-sided Catholic Church hadn't changed — still a couple of vacancies in the cemetery. The fire station was still dwarfed by the hideous drum-studded cell tower.

He smiled at two teenage girls walking in the opposite direction. The smiled back shyly, but once they'd passed they giggled loudly. If he wasn't mistaken, one was the pharmacist's daughter. The other? Looked like she belonged to that house down the street where there were always so many cars.

Considering how long he had been away, things seemed to be pretty much the same. For sure he recognized the fat guy in the Speedo who was pushing a gagging, wheezing lawn mower through a cloud of blue smoke. That, he would like to forget.

The minute he walked into the barber shop, Joe shouted out "Mr. Lawrence! Everything OK? You're not due for another three weeks!"

First published in *Aardvark Press*, May 29, 2014.

On the way home from the library, I passed an alley where it sounded like two guys were pounding a third guy.

They must have seen me looking, because they shouted in my direction. First reaction: run. But I couldn't. It's the wheelchair.

I wheeled across the street towards a figure who was making haste down the empty sidewalk. I called and then yelled to her, but she didn't answer, didn't even look my way. Probably the same b____ who deliberately closed the elevator door in my face when I was leaving the stacks.

On the other side of the street, I felt a little safer, since no one was in sight. However, when you're in a wheelchair, things in the distance are a lot closer than they look.

I started to phone Sally, my girlfriend. Girlfriend in the sense that she's a female friend. She's normal. She's been very patient with her paranoid, handicapped friend. On more than one occasion, she offered to give me a lift when I was working late on my research. Except for a couple of times when it was raining like hell, I routinely declined, partly to manage my mental IOUs and partly to assert my pathetic independence.

Tonight was a matter of pride though, so I stuck the phone back in my jacket pocket and rolled on — my anti-Samaritan lady out of sight save for that bobbing head of hers.

It occurred to me that I should call the cops and report the incident. I hesitated. Those guys could recognize me. For God's sake, I was in a wheelchair on a well-lit sidewalk, and they were in the shadows.

Besides, what kind of idiot gets caught up with a couple of thugs like that? Probably just a family dispute among criminals anyway. And if the cops did ... well, these guys might be off the street for a night but they'd be on the lookout the next.

And what about Ms. Door-in-Your-Face? Why didn't she call? She could at least run.

And why don't the police at least patrol this area once in a while?

I don't ask a lot, and I don't expect charity, pity or any of those other self-indulgent sentiments from others, so why shouldn't I expect not to be expected to show them to anybody else?

For Sally, yes I would. Definitely!

For a stranger, why? It was a stranger who put me in this damn chair. What do I care — why should I care — about a stranger if it means risking my own—

It was Sally's ringtone. As soon as I answered, she noticed a difference in my voice and immediately asked what was the matter.

By this point, I was fully committed to the belief, reached more or less through systematic *reductio ad nihil*, so I answered, "Oh, nothing. It was really nothing."

"What? What was really— "

"Nothing. I'm just real tired, that's all. Think I could cash in that rain cheque?"

First published in *The Release*, July 1, 2014.

As soon as the numbers flashed on the screen, I screamed and dashed out of my cube to the elevators. 13-40-63-2-18-39, 13-40-63-2-18-39, 13-40-63-2-18-39, those were my numbers, alright. But I had to get home, fast ... and find my ticket.

Ever since Leslie moved in, I've had to find a different hiding spot each week. We get along, I suppose, mostly because we never see each other. But there's something about Leslie I don't trust. Recently, my browser history has been erased twice that I know of, and I never do that. Somebody's also been going through my mail. I have to keep an eye on Leslie. All my meds are now locked up in my desk at work.

I grabbed the first cab, bright yellow with 1340 painted on the side. What a coincidence! 1340, 1340, 1340 stuck in my head, and it took me a minute to remember to give the driver my address — 1839 Lawrence West. All of a sudden, the middle numbers were coming up blank.

1340, something, something, something, 1839 — the swarm of possible numbers swirled in my head. A deep breath and I leaned over the front seat to see how much further, then Cliff — and he looked like a Cliff — barked into the rear-view mirror, "Hey, putcher seat on or I'm gonna pull over. Wanna make trouble or somethin? Cop sees that-n-I'm— "

That was enough distraction to get to my place, where I pulled a fifty from my wallet and dropped it cavalierly on the front seat — magnanimity, I was going to love it — jumped out of the care, and raced to the front door. I'd left my key in my purse at the office ... stupid! But old lady Smithson was always home and she'd buzz me in. She lived for the buzzer and often heard it.

When she answered, I shouted into the speaker. I always say it's Leslie. She likes Leslie, and it's kinda funny, because she thinks I'm saying, "Wesley." That's her son she hasn't seen in years. Not my problem though.

This time of day, the ankle biters and slackers are napping, so I caught an empty elevator to the 7th floor and was at my door ... *sans* keys. Duh! Luckily, I hadn't left my cell at work either, so I phoned the super, who, more good luck for me, was on 6 finishing up with Miss Rossi.

After agonizing minutes, I was in my apartment trying to recall where I'd put that damn ticket. Couldn't be in my *Play*— No, first place Leslie would've looked. The Hemingway — Mariel, not the other one — under the TV guide? No, that was last month. Taped to the back of my dresser? Hadn't tried that yet. In the freezer behind the ice-cube trays? Done that. Underneath the bottom plate in the kitchen cabinet? Not sure, so I checked. Nope. Inside the vent cover behind the headboard? Too much heavy lifting and way too dusty. Wouldn't have bothered. The bathroom? Maybe, but where?

When I opened the door to the bathroom, the toilet was lying on its side. On the mirror in red lipstick, "13-40-63-2-18-39" with "63-2" double underlined. Sixty-three square feet — the area I counted every morning after too much dairy. Now, I remembered. But how would Leslie have known? And that red ... that wasn't Leslie's. It was mine and it was in my purse this morning.

First published on the Short Humour Site, April 4, 2014.

They just discovered they'd taken the same class in college 15 years ago. Now Marv and Cami had adjacent cubicles in a call centre.

Last Friday night they and some of the other CSRs went out to a sports bar. The playoffs were underway, and everyone was a hockey fan this year—to varying degrees—since the home team had a chance to win the Cup.

They were 12 to start with, but two had to leave early because of a double shift the next day. Everyone was eating and drinking, talking and laughing and having a good all-around time. Marv and Cami happened to be seated next to one another.

On the huge TV screen, the announcer screamed "GOAL! Pedersen's slap shot IN the back of the net!"

Cami, watching the replay, said "Actually, I prefer slapstick."

"That would be highly illegal even in this game, Cami, but keep a good thought," said Marv.

"Hmm, yeah. After today's day, that's not easy. What a pack of whiny, lying, rude bastards they are sometimes."

"You gotta have a thick skin, not take it so personal. Course, it helps to drink—afterwards, I mean. Puts things in a different—perspective."

"I do, but I didn't even drink this much in college. We oughta get a, uh, a mood rehabilitation allowance or something. Don't you think?"

“Drinking money. What a great idea Cami! How ‘bout you run that one by Percy?”

“Can’t blame a girl for dreaming. And if the gods are listening, mine’s pretty modest compared to some.”

“Hey, did you see that? Puck right in the kisser. God that had to hurt. There’s blood all over the ice.”

“Think we should cheer, too?”

“God no! That would be like— What’s that German word—means when you get off on somebody else’s pain?”

“Schadenfreude.”

“You came up with that pretty fast.”

“Yeah, well everybody’s using it these days—except maybe tweeters. Personally, I try to enjoy some everyday. Got it from *meine mutter.* She spoke German. She used it a lot when she talked about her *mutter.”*

“So, you speak German?”

“Just enough to insult you without your knowing it, but not enough to qualify as business bilingual, *Verdammit.”*

“Whoa! They’re taking the guy off in a stretcher. That’s gotta be more than a mouthful of broken teeth.”

“Guess that’s what it means to get royally pucked.”

“Wow, you’re vicious tonight. What gives?”

“Can we get some more drinks over here?” Cami said to the waitress.

“C’mon, did you think 15 years after college you’d be doing this shit?” asked Cami.

“Course not, but I’ve had worse jobs—mailroom, warehouse. The worst was selling annuities door-to-door.”

“My last year of college I had a great offer. Entry level, with a multinational and ‘lots of growth potential,’ they said.”

“What happened? You didn’t turn it down?”

“Don’t be stupid. They turned me down. Flunked the final in International Trade and then got turned in for cheating.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Did you cheat?”

“Hmph! There was a lot going on back then. Anyway, the bastard was on to me and he tricked me. He deliberately checked all the wrong answers and like a fool I copied them exactly. Must’ve changed them back after I left. But he wasn’t as clever as he thought. Instead of a zero, I got a 12, so I hope it f____ his GPA.”

“I see. But why didn’t you go to Professor Battaglia and explain you were sick or in the middle of a tragedy or something and ask for a retest?”

“Could have if someone hadn’t tipped him off and told him I was cheating.”

“Damn, Cami! I’m so sorry, I had no idea that—”

“It’s not your fault. But, wait a minute how did you know my prof’s name? I know you went to City College and all, but—“

“I was in third year—that was the year we made it to the NIT—and I was gonna graduate early. Battaglia’s class was one of five Econ courses I was taking.”

“Whew! I only had the one and that was one too many. Maybe you remember the guy. Had a freckled face sorta like yours and this great big fro. Looked like a botched home perm. Really smart guy though—had to have been an Economics major—but he wasn’t at all obnoxious from what I could tell. Not that we ever spoke. We International Business students were cliquish—as bad as the Greeks.”

“Don’t think so. It’s been a long time.”

“Some days, it seems like just yesterday. By the way, how’d you do?”

“Um, passed but might as well have failed. I needed an A to get a grad school scholarship, but I choked. Just stupid, careless mistakes.”

In the background, the announcer yelled “SCORE! Gagner’s shot OFF the skate of Taranov—” and the bar erupted in raucous jubilation as the home team had forced an overtime.

First published in Down in the Dirt, March/April 2014, vol. 122.

He nearly missed the bus to Montgomery, because the summer final went long. Jesse was a third year student majoring in everything.

Finally, a break — two weeks out west, roughing it.

Forty-eight hours to get there — northwest Wyoming — and the final eight it was just him, the driver, and some guy chanting in the back of the bus.

At the bus station in Salt Lake City, the ticket agent had chattered on and on about the bear attacks and the rescue helicopters and tried to get Jesse to go to San Francisco instead.

He didn't. In a general store two blocks from the entrance to the park, he met a girl from the BSU. She had a summer job there. Jesse wasn't looking for anyone or anything familiar, so he pretended to be in a big hurry. Besides, he was embarrassed to be seen with that accent.

Back on the road, he hitched a ride with family. The girl, a high schooler, had got her parents to pick him up. In her high-pitched, precocious tone, she explained it was because he was so "cute and interesting and hardly dangerous looking." That made Jesse feel uncomfortable. He let on he needed to throw up, and they pulled over right away. He motioned for them to keep going.

After that unpleasantness, Jesse decided to take the next trail into the backcountry. It was narrow and empty, probably because it was off to the south away from the big tourist attractions.

About five miles in, the path split and to the right it was marked by a red-lettered sign that read, "Bear Activity." Images from the graphic warnings flooded his head. He froze. All he had was this silly string of bear bells. Weapons weren't allowed. the clerk in the store swore that the bells worked. Jesse put them on and jingled down the left track of the trail, still anxious but curious enough not to turn and run ... yet.

The woods got closer and closer, and denser. He couldn't see more than 20 feet in. More and more it seemed like an ambush at every turn, and that feeling peaked when he found himself standing in a small grassy field full in the sun, ringed on all sides by dark forest. Out in the open, he was vulnerable, and he knew he was being watched.

Keeping calm, he walked backwards to blend into the wood. Bursting out of the silence behind him, a powerful embrace grabbed him and held him firmly. "Relax. Just relax. You're okay." Jesse nearly fainted, but he did wilt and slip out of the embrace, landing hard on his tailbone. "Water?" After a few long, deep breaths, he took the canteen and drank greedily.

The man, Harry, was a tracker and guide from Las Vegas who said he was bushwhacking his way through the park from south to north. It was illegal to do that of course, but he was hunting bear, not to kill, just to track. Harry was wearing a leather vest and a khaki fishing hat. No guns ... no rifle for sure, but that long scabbard at his side ... maybe a Bowie knife?

Harry didn't say much more but led the way back to the road, and Jesse was happy for the company and the direction. It didn't last long. Back at the fork with the bear warnings, Harry turned left and kept going. Jesse watched until he disappeared and then double-timed it back to the road.

He got another lift. This one uneventful. He got out at a very popular trailhead. This was more like it. A wider trail and plenty of people around. Made it easier to relax and enjoy hiking in the woods.

Jesse walked with purpose and an explorer's curiosity. He covered miles, judging by the time and his pace. By late afternoon, he'd outwalked everyone. When he finally realized how low the sun had sunk and how alone he was, he turned around and set off at a trot, jangling as he went.

Coming around a blind corner, he almost tripped over someone kneeling down to take a picture. No harm done though. Turned out the man, Tony, was a chef and a freelance photo journalist from San Diego.

They joined up, and first thing, Tony insisted that Jesse take off the bells. He didn't want Jesse to scare everything away. On the way back to the road they took a side trail that led to a small waterfall where Tony hoped to photograph more plant life, and with a bit of luck, wildlife.

Across the rolling terrain, scattered with thick underbrush, they marched. Out of the stillness, a thunderous crashing sound came from a small copse ahead. Jesse thought, "BEAR!" Tony took his lens cap off and got ready to shoot. In a split second, a bull moose was running right at them with his rack lowered. They dived — Jesse left, Tony right. The camera was crushed.

Jesse got to wear his bear bells after that. For supper, Tony made his special recipe for scrambled eggs with sunflower seeds and a dash of something that looked like oregano. Whatever it was, it mellowed them out, so when the heavy rains came late in the evening, they didn't freak out but matter-of-factly crawled between a couple of fallen trees and pulled their ponchos over the top. Next

morning, Jesse headed back to the public areas, while Tony stayed in the woods compiling his notes.

After making the circuit and taking in the postcard sights, Jesse caught a ride up north. It was red Cadillac convertible with four guys in beards, bandanas, and sunglasses who were smoking pot and blasting Lynyrd Skynyrd into the big, blue sky. On the dash, a hounds-toothed bobblehead bounced mesmerizingly with the curving mountain highway.

First published in *Dew on the Kudzu - A Southern Ezine*, March 13, 2014.

I hadn't been back to the cafeteria since, but today I needed something substantial to tide me over because I had three straight exams in the afternoon.

Sitting there alone with my meatloaf and mashed potatoes, I remembered bumping into Willard just two days after we'd met. It was meatloaf then, too, though I think it was chicken or turkey meatloaf. He had salad.

#

Willard was going on about what separated him — us, as somehow I got included — from the rest. Late lunchtime in the dining hall and the *rest* was a group of diehard linemen, 300-pound guards and tackles from the football team who were clearly eating from a different menu.

"Orwell, Golding, Huxley, Beckett, Kafka, Koestler, Ionesco, Solzhenitsyn, Borges, Camus, Miller, Sartre, Pinter — these and probably another 40 are the authors that every freshman should have read before coming to college," he said.

I didn't dare tell him that I had only heard of a couple myself. Our English teacher doubled as a PE instructor, and his repertoire was limited to a couple of works each by Shakespeare and Dickens.

Afterwards, I tried to remember some of the names so I could look them up in the library.

#

Willard was the first person on campus I met. We'd literally been thrown together at the bookstore when I tripped on a fold in the carpet and spilled my entire first semester on the floor at his feet.

I readied myself for the abuse of an upperclassman, but he didn't yell or laugh. He looked at me, then at the books, then back at me. It was as if he was fascinated by the collection — an unusual one, I suppose: Western Civ, Physics, World Lit, Zoology, Economics, and Latin.

"That's quite a load you're carrying. First semester?" he asked.

"Yeah. Haven't decided my major," I answered.

"I hope you're just as eager your senior year. I'm Willard."

"That's the challenge, isn't it? I'm Gray."

"You get kidded about that, don't you?"

"Yeah. But it's like water off a duck's back ... sort of."

"One day it will be. I get the same thing. Anyway, let's get your pile of books together and go to the checkout. We can grab a coffee next door. I'm meeting a friend, and I'll introduce you."

He had only one small volume — Wittgenstein.

"Wittgenstein, huh?" I asked. "I don't know ... *him*?"
"*Him*, Ludwig. I'll give you a crash course in linguistic philosophy sometime."

"Never heard— "

"Never mind. Later."

#

Seated at a table by the window was Mildred, polite but not effusive so she stood out. Willard showed her his purchase, but she wasn't overly impressed. Business studies and languages — French and Spanish, were her fields, and law school was next.

That didn't sound like Willard, but then what did I know about Willard?

With a nod in his direction, Mildred proceeded to fill me in a bit. They had met in a club — not a bar, but an organization. the strange thing was she didn't name the club, and, in fact, went to some effort to avoid speaking the name, so I didn't feel comfortable pressing. We had some of those at home, too.

Although he had started out in architecture like his father, he had switched to film studies in his second year. Once a month, Willard hosted a special screening of a *film noir*, an experimental film, and once in a while one of his own. He and four others shared an historic old two-story house two blocks from campus and downtown, and there was easily room for 30-40 people but the audience was more select.
Willard and Mildred made me feel young and ignorant even though they were only juniors themselves — so only two years older than me.

I listened as they talked about campus politics. It never occurred to me that student politics could be worth the time to think or talk about. World events, national politics ... that was the stuff that interested me. In high school, I'd even written essays on current events,

drawing from the town library's collection of *Time*, *Newsweek* and *US News & World Report*.

But deans and department heads and faculty senates and trustees were a whole different world. What gave it life for me was the football program angle. Of course, I'd read about allegations of gambling, drugs, and prostitution but had dismissed it as likely the rule and not the exception. Sports were tainted even in small towns.

What I was hearing was that there were people like Willard and Mildred who were taking this seriously. But I wasn't here to be a campus activist and with my course load and this being my first semester in college, I wasn't going to be recruited.

"I have to be going. I've got six classes and two labs tomorrow, and I still have to unpack some things, so I'd better take off," I said.

"It was nice meeting you, Gray. I apologize for all the shop talk, but we'll do this again, and, uh, next time we'll nix the local politics," said Mildred.

"How about Saturday?" asked Willard. "There's a home game and it's at night, so the restaurants will be empty from 6-10 p.m. Unless of course you're going."

"No, I won't have time for any games, but there's a pizza place near the library. Do you know it? I could meet you at, say, seven."

"Yeah, Carmine's. Their deep dish is famous. Okay, seven it is," said Willard.

"Not me. I'm going to the game," said Mildred.

"But you were just saying that— "

"To protest."

#

"Did you know that Chicago eliminated its football program after the war?" asked Willard, nosing through the menu which he must have known by heart.

"The Bears?" I asked.

"No! The University of Chicago. The president said it interfered with the academic standing of the university."

"I didn't know that. Why did you bring that up?"

"There are some people who think that's the way we should go."

"Do you agree?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do. Don't you think those giants we saw in the cafeteria the other day are out of place in a university, kind of like dinosaurs in Manhattan?"

"Well, I guess, but— "

"Consciousness raising. That's what I mean. We — and I mean everybody — need to have our consciousness raised. Not to exploit the theatrical, but it's evolution — evolution we can direct. Maybe, in our local situation, more like nudge."

"That sounds a little like social engineering, and isn't that why you thought we should read *1984*, B*rave New World*— "

"You have to read them in context but also in retrospect. The striving for perfection which was justifiably satirized and criticized by these authors was still primitive and barbaric at the time."

A familiar face on the big TV screen behind Willard caught my eye.

"Mildred! Oh my God!"

Willard turned around and looked up at the TV. Indeed, it was Mildred, in handcuffs, being escorted by campus police.

Willard jumped up, said he was going to the police station, and asked if I would cover the check.

Dazed by the combination of Willard's pronouncements and Mildred's arrest, I simply nodded.

I finished one pizza, packed the other, and went back to the library until it closed. I never saw Mildred again, and Willard I saw a couple of times, but each time I managed to be in a hurry someplace or other.

#

I'd hardly touched the meatloaf when my watch alarm went off. I had 10 minutes to get over to the auditorium for my Physics final.

First published in *Aardvark Press*, February 16, 2014.

Doc Baxter had been our family doctor going on 50 years. On Momma's side anyway. Daddy was from the city.

The first time I remember going to the doctor was right before I started first grade. Just a checkup, Daddy said. He took me because it was Saturday.

The waiting room was huge and square. Hanging on the blue pastel walls were bright paintings of the town and set against the walls were heavy wooden chairs that couldn't tip over. On the large coffee table in the middle were neatly arranged copies of *Southern Living*, *Field & Stream*, *Reader's Digest*, *Sports Illustrated*, and the weekly newspaper.

It was the end of summer and it wasn't crowded. There was a skinny guy with a thick black beard and a cast on his left leg. I asked Daddy why he didn't have any names on his cast like my older sister Tessie had when she broke her arm climbing a tree in our neighbor's backyard. He said it was probably a new cast and he just hadn't gotten around to it.

There was an old woman with sunglasses who seemed to stare right into me. When I told Daddy, he whispered, "She can't see you, son. She just hears your voice. Don't talk so loud."

Up at the reception window, a shaky old man with thick, white eyebrows was taking small bottles of pills out of a brown paper bag and handing them over to the lady. That seemed odd. Daddy saw where I was looking and anticipated my question.
"That's Mr. Paul. His wife just passed, and I expect he's bringing back her medication in case someone else can use it."

"That's sad, Daddy."

"Yes, it is, son, and that's why Momma's baking a pie to take over later this evening. Mrs. Paul was one of her favorite teachers."

There were two other people. A young girl and her mother who looked real tired. The girl had been crying. The mother held her daughter's hand and stared straight ahead. I looked up at Daddy, and he said very softly, "Some things aren't proper for us to ask about, son."

Just then the front door opened setting off the tinkling sound of the bell. You couldn't sneak in here, that's for sure. It was a lady from the bank. She was sneezing up a storm, and when she moved her hanky away, I saw her nose was as big and bright as an apple.

"Hay fever," said Daddy.

"But there's not hay yet. Daddy, when do they start making those rolls— "

Before I could finish, the nurse called us to Doc Baxter's consulting rooms in the back.

Doc Baxter welcomed us.

"Well, well, young man. I see you're all grown up and ready to make your mark in the world. We've gotta make sure you're fit as a fiddle. We're gonna give you a checkup, and I betcha you'll pass with flying colors. It'll be just like going into the Army."
"But I thought you were in the Navy?" I asked.

"Yep, now stick out your tongue and say 'Ah' ... again. Now hold still. I'm gonna look in your ears. Now your eyes. This may tickle a bit. I'm gonna tap your funny bone to check your reflexes."

He didn't talk about the Navy, but there were pictures on the wall. I saw them up close when I got on the scales. One was a framed letter with a medal, and next to it was a wide photograph of a bunch of men in green uniforms, 'fatigues,' Daddy called them. I was confused.

"But isn't Navy blue, Daddy?"

"Doc Baxter was a surgeon in a field hospital not on a ship," he answered, and of course he had to explain that one to me, because for me a field was either a corn field or a football or baseball field.

Meanwhile, Doc Baxter had been going over the paperwork at his desk. Before I could ask any more questions, he was congratulating me and patting me on the back.

"You're a healthy and inquisitive young man. Hang on to those two things. And be sure to say hello to your momma for me. You know I was her doctor when she was your age?"

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine*, Issue 2, March 2014.

You may laugh, but late night TV commercials do fill a void.

That's what my shrink said, and up to a point, I think he's right. But he didn't stop there. He called it a dependency, like nicotine, alcohol, or crack. That was overstepping the bounds, I thought. It was clear what he was really up to. He wanted me to be dependent ... on him. Kind of a customer loyalty thing for shrinks. Well, that was too much, so I dropped him and switched to a phone shrink.

#

Everything in my bachelor's apartment *sans* view has a place, and everywhere, there are boxes, opened and unopened, containing things that I needed, things that seemed necessary in the wee hours of a recent or long ago night.

Some of the older boxes I've re-purposed. Take my entertainment center, built for my TV. Second most prominent on its shelves is the serialized *History and Future of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, its colorful spines tastefully arranged. All the nooks and crannies are plugged with smaller boxes of snow globes, gold and silver photograph frames, onyx sculptures, a Rubik's cube clock, a perpetual pendulum, authentic uncirculated coins from the USSR, Rhodesia, and Kronos, a mint condition set of stamps for lunar mail, and what have you.

In the middle of the room is largish square *faux* glass coffee table. On one side is a stack of brochures, prospectuses, etc. explaining how to play the housing bubble, how to profit when others are going under, how to get rich without changing out of your pajamas, why

every investor should own gold, and so on. All absolutely necessary, not least because of my limiting disability allowance.

The rest of the table is where I keep my mini-library of miracle diets, and health cures. There are protein diets, carb diets, eat-all-you-want diets, take-a-pill diets, drink-your-meal diets, purgative and detox diets; cures for eczema, psoriasis, arthritis, insomnia, flatulence; and a self-testing kit for schizophrenia, an instructional video for diagnosing and treating OCD, over-the-counter nutraceuticals for depression, bipolar disorders, manias, phobias, and so forth.

Underneath are boxes of CDs and cassettes and a select few mint-condition albums featuring reproductions of the biggest hits from the past 50 years, leaning mini-towers of DVD buttressed by other leaning mini-towers of DVDs, and a 42-hour VHS series on how to build your own boat to sail around the world. The plastic packaging is completely intact on everything, although a couple of discs, one by the Captain and Tennille and another by Lionel Richie, did suffer some damage post transit.

On the counter between the sink and the bar fridge, I keep a miscellany of gadgets — juicers, choppers, slicers, dicers, blenders and teflon pans, electric grills, woks, waffle irons, espresso machines, a state-of-the-art solar-powered coffee maker, toasters, ultra-thin microwaves, and self-sharpening stainless steel knives — all still in their original boxes. There are extras, just in case, in sealed boxes on the floor along with boxes of miracle cleaners, magic cloths, and specialty cleaning brushes.
There are even more boxes in the bathroom with supplies of soap (bars and liquid), monogrammed and commemorative towels and sheets, an electric razor with 18 attachments and a rechargeable battery, a manicure/pedicure set, and an eclectic collection of motel art to cover the windowless walls. (I'm still deciding whether to go with a water or forest motif in the bathroom.) The bathroom's so full

that several times a day I have to move boxes off the toilet seat and put them into the leaky shower. Naturally, this depends on the diet *du jour*.

#

For several weeks now, an exciting new commercial has been running between 1:00 and 3:00 a.m. It couldn't have come at a more opportune moment. I'm embarrassed to say this, but I had become indifferent and bored.

It's as if the advertisers can read my mind. They guarantee freedom from all the products I had once really and truly needed but now am ready to move beyond. Unlike my former shrink, they're nonconfrontational and nonjudgmental about it, and they're right on the mark.

Not only have the struck the perfect tone with someone like me who has dedicated so much time and plastic to teleshopping, they also offer the personalized service of coming to my door to remove everything I no longer need, AND they'll write me a check on the spot.

And the GENIUS — the genius is that I can start all over again!

So, when I say "I DEFINITELY need that," what I mean is that my 'needing to have' has reached the highest possible level, the peak, the apex, the summit, the pinnacle, the zenith, the apogee, the fin de siècle. Umh, forget the last one.

I really and truly NEED that, and I can't wait to tell my telephone shrink what a positive step I've taken on my own. What I wouldn't give to thumb my nose at my former shrink.

First published in *The Story Shack*, February 3, 2014.

"I'm sorry sir, but this is the last car and this gentleman has already rented it," said the agent.

"But I had a reservation ... to Danvers. My secretary booked it yesterday," complained the man at the counter.

"Unfortunately sir, that car was involved in a traffic accident. Head office is sending a replacement car first thing tomorrow morning."

"Well that's not good enough. You can't be telling me that you don't have any other cars to rent. What kind of operation is this?"

"It's a small airport, sir, and it's the busy season. You might try asking the other gentleman to share a ride."

"The 'gentleman' in the cowboy hat? You're kidding?"

"I'm going through Danvers. Heard you say that's where you're headed," said the other man as he shouldered his way through the glass door, luggage in each hand and an unlit cigarette between his lips.

"You're sure there's no other car on the lot? asked the man turning to the agent.

"Nothing. He's your best bet until tomorrow."

"Damn it! I can't wait til then. I've gotta be there tomorrow," said the first man. "Hey there. I don't smoke," he shouted, turning to the second man who was paused in the doorway.

"No problem. Trying to quit anyway."

#

The first man was going to Danvers on family business. The second, his ride, was going to a small community — not even incorporated — south of Danvers. A funeral, he said.

For 20 minutes they rode with not another word between them, only the radio. Chris broke the silence when he heard an ad for a personal injury attorney. "Damn lawyers. Ruining the country. My Economics professor used to say were the pallbearers of society."

"Could be. Did your professor have a bad experience?"

"Well, I don't know. We didn't ask. We just assumed he was talking theoretically. Why? What difference does it make?"

"Maybe none. Couldn't say."

"Well, I can say. From my personal experience they're ambulance chasers. A drag on the economy and it's a sham that they protect the underdog."

"May be."

"Our family company has been in business since the '20s providing good jobs for the people of Danvers, and now we're in the middle of a class action lawsuit that could destroy us."

"You don't say."

"You mean you haven't heard about this? I thought you were from nearby."

"Yep. Grew up in Four Corners. Went to school in Danvers. I remember — it was back in 3rd grade, the first year of integration — me and one of the white boys used to race to see who was the fastest. He was used to a flat asphalt track and swore I had an advantage running on ground that was half grass and full of rocks."

"Charlie!"

"Yep."

"Don't you remember? Christopher! My parents— "

"I know."

"You said you were going to a funeral. Was it— "
"Yep. My nephew."

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you. He was a good boy. His mother and father are taking it real hard."
"How— "

"We don't have to talk about 'how' just yet. There'll be plenty of time for that. By the way, I should tell you I'm representing the plaintiffs."

"What?"

"Actually, I'm on the litigation team, Christopher. They wanted me because of my community connections."

"Swear to God it wasn't me, Charlie. I'm just a silent partner. Haven't been hands-on in years. Get the engineering report. But that's between you and me, Charlie. I won't repeat any of this in court."

"This isn't a criminal case, Christopher, but if it comes to that — just for old time's sake — I'd advise you to cut a deal quick as you can."

First published in *Writers Haven Magazine*, Issue #15, Micro Fiction Special.

What's this little black gangsta think he's doing? Does he know he's fallen asleep on the shoulder of an old Jew, someone he may have been taught to mistrust, possibly hate? And all these other people … why are they ignoring this?

Friday night, rush hour on the subway like any other weeknight … but not. There's a head, tucked deep inside a dark gray hoodie, leaning on me, no, more like pinning me in my seat. It's not particularly threatening, not in any violent sort of way. I mean, he's just a boy. I guess he could have—wouldn't be surprised if he had a knife … or even a gun. But for now, while he's sound asleep, it's a rudeness, an intrusion … a violation of my space on this overcrowded subway car.

A tall muscular man, with menacing tattoos up and down both arms, pushes his way through the standing patrons, looks our way, and says "Ain't that thweet? Ith like a Norman Rockwell," just before he steps off the train.

Across the way, between the suits hidden in their papers, through the ebb and flow of one-sided conversations, and past the bobbing, swaying heads immersed in silence, Grandma stares vacantly in our direction, yet there is a faint smile out of the left corner of her mouth. The right side doesn't move. Fixed there, as if by a stroke.

In the background off to my right, a young woman is excitedly going over her guest list with her girlfriends. Over to my left, a little girl is whispering loudly the questions that I myself have been asking. Her mother shushes her and tries to distract her with one of the presents she'd just bought—a book about ballet, *Peter and the Wolf*, I think I hear her say.

For twenty minutes we ride like this. My friend fast asleep on my arm. Not snoring, not drooling—thank God—just quietly sleeping.

By now, mostly people are leaving the train at the various stations, but occasionally we pick up riders headed further down the line. One, a scruffy-looking thirty-something, who has an air that doesn't suit his scruffiness, ends up standing directly in front of us though there are plenty of empty seats nearby. After a minute or two—maybe the time he needed to consider the awkwardness of my situation—he asks whether I'd like him to wake the youngster.

To my surprise, I say "No, I don't think so. He seems to be exhausted. But I'm getting off in three stops. Perhaps then you could take my place."

First published in Apocrypha and Abstractions March 31, 2014.

Ernesto came by it accidentally. It was in the basement below the Cat's Meow. Impaired and heavy-footed, he tumbled down the steps and landed on his rump facing a different kind of red door.

It was open — just a crack — and he was curious, so he went through. Then on second thought he turned around but the door wasn't there.

Dim lights at ground level lit three narrow corridors. Ernesto chose the right since he was already leaning that way. After a few steps, he glanced back. Now, the entrance to the corridor had vanished.

So, forward he walked like a landlubber on a ship in stormy seas. Straight, then left and straight again, and there in an alcove, a young poet was speaking.

> Welcome to our room fair stranger.
> Though thou be drunken to excess,
> Thou mayest progress by words,
> But thou wilt stay til ALL be read.

The words spun through his already spinning head. He steadied himself against a wall. It seemed important, so he asked the young woman to repeat what she'd said.

> Thou knowest the drink consumeth.
> Nay, the room consumeth more, you shall see.
> Thou wilt remain til ALL be said
> 'Twill be the end as I have read.

Ernesto, captivated by the magic of her voice, made to approach, but a seamless wall suddenly appeared where the poetess and the alcove had been.

From further down the corridor, a theatrical voice beckoned. A sturdy, white-haired man with a ruddy complexion was in the midst of a reading. Ernesto's snatches of attentiveness were mostly unintentional.

> ... have become the anthropologist who fills with copious notes his notebooks and ... who sees but ... is not questioned who judges but is not ... exposed ... our primitive selves ... with ... the nearsighted ... perspective of absolute ... gods.

George Glover, the sign said. An obscure philosopher reading a handwritten page — the corpus of his scholarship. Recalling the thwarted encounter with the poetess, Ernesto drew near and watched with satisfaction as the professor disappeared in the middle of the second reading.

In the distance, a familiar, stern voice proclaimed, "In the beginning." Ernesto tottered hurriedly down the corridor but in his inebriated exuberance he overran the alcove and smashed face first into the far wall.

Flat on his back, Ernesto raised his head, blinked at his fractured wristwatch, then collapsed, his head plunking down hard on the floor. Unable to move, he lay there captive to the endless repetition of a word only vaguely understood and then only through its tone — *SELAH*.

First published in *thickjam*, No. 363, February 6, 2014.

Could anyone else hear them? Not just the conversations, but the whispers and the words not spoken. All of sudden, I could.

Amidst the swirling sounds of a train station at rush hour, I could hear them, sense them—whispers and unarticulated thoughts—and some I could make out.

"Call me as soon as you get in?" asked the man who was sitting behind me, facing the timetable of arrivals and departures.

"Sure, honey, but I'd rather call you from the hotel, so it may be kind of late."

"That's alright, I'll be up late reading tonight anyway."

What she whispered under her breath made it plain as day to me, but apparently not to him, that she was leaving him. Could be he wasn't paying attention.

A boy scout troop was moving through the concourse like a swarm of bees.

"It's way different than the subway. I once went to Chicago. That train—it had a locomotive—was big and fast and there was food service and places to sleep. Nothing like the subway."

The chubby youngster found himself marshalling a flock of wide-eyed little boys who were too entranced to pick up the menacing chuckle I heard, or thought I heard.

Seated next to me, a couple was talking marriage.

"I knew my parents would never go along, but I thought yours were more open-minded."

"About some things, like business, yes, they can be quite modern, but not when it comes to family relationships."

"Well, they drew the line—"

"That's their generation-speak. Ours says if they cross the line, we'll welcome them. Right?"

But what the taller of the two men added in a lower voice—something about a forfeited inheritance—wasn't noticed by his partner.

A young, stern-looking Army private dropped his duffel bag on my outstretched shoe as he reached down to hug his aunt.

"Sorry mister," he said.

"No worries," I answered.

"Your Momma passed away this morning. She knew you was coming, but she couldn't hold on no longer," said the aunt tearfully.

"Did she suffer real bad at the end?" asked the soldier, repressing a yawn of … exhaustion.

"I'm sure you coulda come before now if you'd really cared," she whispered voicelessly.

"Now, I can finally sell that damn house—" and, as if hearing his subvocalized relief, she added "But the government done claimed

eminent domain and that house ain't gonna fetch near what it's worth."

“Excuse me, are you listening to my conversation?” a thickset man with a brush cut and a well-tailored suit beside me asked.

“No, no, no. Of course not!” I insisted, though I guess I was leaning towards him and I suppose I did hear … accidentally.

“Aren't you going to tell her?”

“Excuse me?”

“About the FBI, the search warrant?”

“Look buddy, you've got a very active imagination, but I'd appreciate it if you'd leave me out of it. Otherwise … slander, you do know what that is? If not, I can have my lawyer bring you up to speed. Would you like that?”

“Please accept my apologies. I really didn't mean to offend. I mean, I had no intention of upsetting you … or your plans—“

“What plans?”
“Oh, nothing. Just plans. You know, everybody has plans.”

“You seem to know more than you're saying. Why don't we go outside and talk about what you think you heard. I still have 10 minutes, don't you?”

“Uhhh.”

“Good. Let's go.”

“They'll never talk to me that way again,” muttered a frazzled young woman with two battered suitcases. Before I could ask “Who,” I had been hustled out the door.

I handed him my wallet, and he looked at me in surprise then in amusement.

“That's very good, but I'll need your briefcase, phone, ticket, and keys, too.”

“Why do—“

You'll get it all back. I'll put it in a locker at the next station. The name—let's see, Ira Kessler. That's a good picture. Some people take lousy driver's license photos.”

“But—“

“You'll be delayed a little, long enough for me to leave without any further interference. Here's a cab. I'll give the driver $100 to take you straight home—that means no stops, understood?

“What—“
“Once you've got your things back, forget about me, forget about this conversation. But you know all this already.” He texted something. “I don't think I need to say anything else, do I?”

But he did, because as suddenly as it had come on, it vanished. I couldn't read him anymore. Grabbing my arm firmly, he shook me out of my daze then escorted me to the waiting yellow cab where he gave the driver an unfamiliar downtown address.

“It's just to buy some time. You should be home within the hour. And don't worry the driver. She's getting paid at the other end, too.

In case you're wondering, nothing's going to happen to you, that is, as long as you don't do something stupid like jump out of a moving car."

I protested that I didn't know anything, that it was a big mistake, that I couldn't even remember what I'd said much less what I'd heard.

"No doubt it comes and goes. I've heard about this spontaneous environmental telepathy. It's probably nonsense like most of what I my ex is into, but to be on the safe side, I have to do this."

The cabbie peeled out and at the first red light she turned around and said she didn't want to hear any crazy talk about the FBI, fugitives, or kidnapping.

"None of that's any of my business. What is my business is taking you from Point A to Point B. So, sit tight, and whatever you're thinking, remember I'm way ahead of you. Got it?"

She knew I did.

First published in Weirdyear, March 7, 2014.

I was on the road a quarter of million miles a year back then, and I used to listen to the radio nonstop. Heard a lot of music. Heard some of it to death. Top 40 played over and over, and I got to where I'd know a song two or three seconds into it. Songs would get inside my head fairly regularly. Right in the middle of my six hours' sleep was the worst. I'd fight it, toss and turn, and eventually give up, get in the truck, and drive on. Sometimes I hummed … the person next to me would say.

"Love Will Keep Us Together," didn't exactly strike a chord with a long-haul trucker, but that didn't keep it out. On the road every day and night, except one or two weekends a month, a song like that will drive a man crazy. That was 'specially so after I came home unannounced one time. But it stayed with me … way longer than the tan line on my ring finger.

Earworms. We didn't have that word for it back then. We just said we had a song stuck in our head. Not everybody had the same ones. I had some doozies. Next to Toni Tennille's was one called "Why Can't We Be Friends?" Times were tough. In there for my kid brother and out here for the rest of us: colour wars, lost wars, drug wars, straight on queer, war between the sexes, war on the 'man' and by the 'man,' war on the fuzz and war by the fuzz, and so on. Only natural that somebody would come along with a song to make a killing off it.

It was a lot of years ago. At first, I was okay with it; 'Friends,' I mean. Funk was black, so it wasn't my thing, but like I always said, if it keeps me on the road when I gotta make a run, I don't care if it's a homosexual drag queen brother or an acid-tripping draft dodger up in Moosejaw. I did draw the line at country, 'cause it made me

wanna get real drunk and classical, 'cause it made me wanna pull over and go to sleep.

#

Heading down to Mobile one October, I pulled over for dinner at a truck stop just outside Cincinnati, and it was playing on the jukebox.

"So what's that supposed to mean, mister? On your T-shirt there, 'Put Woody Away.' What's that mean?" asked the waitress. It was a gag gift from a buddy. On account I'd lost my shirt in the Rose Bowl betting on the Buckeyes.

I wasn't paying close enough attention to my surroundings. For the next few seconds, I saw red, intensely, and lots of it, before I blacked out. My new earworm serenaded me into unconsciousness and greeted me on the other side; waking up in the hospital, a young nurse poking me nervously with a needle. It wasn't soothing. The music, I mean. It just made me angry. Odd, I thought.

#

I yanked the IV out of my arm and told the bewildered nurse I'd pay what I owed, but didn't have insurance to cover anything else. "Where do I pay and where's my truck?" I asked.

Instead of directing me, she grabbed a hold of my other arm and escorted me to the billing department. When I left the counter, she was still there. She drove me to the truck stop and gave me some pain killers. I looked in her eyes, but had to look away. "Gotta go. I'm way behind."

"You're gonna work yourself into an early grave, Ronnie. It's not worth it."

"I'll take care. You take care, umh—"

"Janice."

"Take care, Janice."

Never did see Janice again, but I added her to my long list of 'what ifs.'

#

For a while, all-night talk radio rescued me from the repetitive strain of Top 40. I even got to where I didn't mind Larry King. After all, it was one of his interviews where I found out about this guy, Least Heat Moon, who wrote a book about his personal odyssey—Larry's words—across America's back roads, and the people he met, and the stories they told.

Thought I could do that—sure had my share of stories to tell. But I couldn't. Couldn't focus while I was driving—even talking into a tape recorder—and couldn't keep anything straight when I wasn't driving, I was so dog-tired. Stopped listening to talk radio and went back to musing through my 'what-ifs' and about the places I was speeding past and, of course, Top 40 radio, which still beat popping pills. The morning I caught myself singing "Karma Chameleon" in the shower, I switched to Mexican radio. Didn't speak much Spanish, but that was kinda the point. However, the beat was what stuck with me, and I couldn't shake it.

I won a bilingual parrot in a card game in El Paso and trained it to talk trucker talk on the CB radio. One day it died. Its last words were "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

#

Now—thirty some odd years later—I share a room with three other seniors, and I'm the only one of us who knows it. A little clock radio by my bed is just out of reach, and it's always on. The custodian, all smiles, makes sure it's set to 96.3. He likes classical music, and The Phantom is the best, he says. I know it. I mean, "The Music of the Night" I know by heart, 'cause it plays three or four or five times a day on the radio and endlessly in my head.

First published in Lowestoft Chronicle, May 31, 2014.

Nathalie walked in with a box. Said it was for me. Didn't say who it was from, just that it was left for me.

I asked her to open it since my arthritis was acting up real bad and I was liable to drop it and break or scatter whatever was inside.

She said she'd have to do it later, 'cause she had to go look after Miss Emily down the hall. Miss Emily had fallen again.

Nathalie put the box on my bedside table, within sight but just out of reach in case I tried to get it and pushed it over by accident.

It was a pretty good size box. Not a moving box or anything close to that size. More like a hat box, for women's hats. I never wore a hat, but my late wife, Lizzie, did.

A hat box. Square. Two of them that size would have been a perfect cube. Seemed kinda old to me. Not that it was scratched or damaged in any way. It just looked old, like it couldn't be from today's stores. But then I'm not exactly up-to-date anymore.

Something to think about—this box. I had to figure who could have sent it and what was inside it. Couldn't imagine. Hadn't seen or talked to any friends or family in I don't know how long. Course, most of our friends were on the West Coast and both Lizzie and me were only children and our two boys died young. Their wives remarried and we lost touch.
What could be in there? Didn't look heavy when Nathalie moved it. Didn't rattle around either. Maybe a blanket, an afghan, or whatever they call them, donated by some organization or other in town. That would be nice. Thoughtful. It does get pretty chilly in here some nights and that would feel good on my legs.

Nathalie was back. She started to take my vitals, and I shook my head with as much force as I could muster and said I had to know what was in the box. She asked if I'd been worrying about that all this time. I nodded.

She moved the box close to my bedside and took off the lid. Inside was a framed photograph of me and Lizzie—must have been in our twenties—and another of me and Lizzie and the boys at the Grand Canyon. There was a commencement program for our oldest who graduated first in his class in college. There were letters from our youngest from when he was overseas. His boyhood stamp collection was neatly tucked away. A copy of our first mortgage was in there, partly burned because we changed our minds and decided to stamp it "Paid in Full" and keep it as a souvenir. The dog tags from Tag, Sparky, Pal, and Roxie were carefully wrapped in a kerchief that Roxie used to wear on special occasions. Christmas cards from our closest friends and our grownup boys were carefully bundled. The pocket watch from her grandfather—on her mother's side—that got returned…twice.

I stopped her. "Nathalie, take it away! Please! It's too much. Please take it away."

She did. That evening I begged her for an extra pain killer or sedative or something—just for one night, I said.
The next day I realized that Lizzie had sent the box, sort of. She had kept a box of memorabilia like that in our attic. I never looked in it. After Lizzie passed, I never thought about the box again, so it must have been sitting there until the new owners came across it and pieced together who it belonged to. That was real thoughtful of them.

First published in Quail Bell Magazine, March 15, 2014.

He really couldn't say how he'd go there — 160 storeys up on Vancouver's SinoCanAm Oil Building — on a typically cold, wet night in late December. There were no explanations, only a few clues.

He was wearing a bright red mac that he said he'd found on the street during the city's latest occupy protests. It was a good fit and warmer and drier than his raincoat.

SCAB, its nickname in some circles, was the tallest building on the West Coast. No wonder it attracted crowds. Up there, you could see the snowflakes before they melted into an ugly spitting rain. Not a good enough reason to be there though.

The sounds of sirens were funneled up the concrete, glass and steel walls, but they could have been for anybody, or everybody if you believed some of the people on the street ... so not a good clue.

Behind him was a coiled rope with some rappeling gear. He knew the gear. It was for mountain climbing. Beside the rope was a tightly rolled-up banner, white with red lettering showing through.

He turned aside to get more light so he could check his watch — a Rolex. Odd.

Close to the edge, but not close enough to get a good look over. As if afraid of falling. Also odd.

#

"Why were you up there, Mr., uh, Sebastian?"

He told them he was an activist and had planned to unfurl a huge banner on the side of the SCAB. Inexplicably, he'd got cold feet, so to speak. He was alone. There was no one else. The Rolex? His parents were wealthy, but he had rejected their lifestyle and money. Why did he keep it? Why not.

"We know someone else was up there. Who was it?"

This time he explained that he was planning to rappel down the building far enough to unroll a banner but had been held up, in a manner of speaking, by a guy in a gray Italian suit. They had scuffled, and Sebastian thought the guy had left, but while Sebastian was checking his gear, the suit came up and lunged at him. Sebastian ducked aside just in time, and the guy sailed over the edge and down — 1600 feet, more or less.

"A guy in a suit, eh? Why do you think he didn't just call security?"

Sebastian now conceded he'd seen the guy in a red coat on the roof emptying a large hockey bag and had gone over to find out what he was up to. The guy stood up and started to throw a punch, but he slipped and fell backwards over the edge and into the street below.

The Rolex again? It was a bonus from the firm. Yeah, SCA. No, it wasn't a family gift. He must have been confused — the late night questioning, the tragic fall, the whole thing. And the red coat? Well, when he tried to grab the guy — to save him really — he only managed to catch hold of the sleeve of the coat, and the guy just slipped right out of it and over the edge. Yeah, of course he put it on. Hadn't he already said it was really cold and wet, and besides he was in a state of shock.

"May I see your watch, sir? You see, we found another one — just like yours — on the deceased behind the SinoCanAm Building. But here's the strange thing. It was inscribed on the back. Inscribed to— Here, let's have a look at yours, sir. Same inscription, 'Gemini,' only yours is not inscribed to Sebastian but the deceased's is. Do, uh, did you have a brother — a twin — sir?

First published in *thickjam*, No. 390, May 13, 2014.

The Suit Shoppe was an institution. Generations of men and boys had been measured, fitted and suited there. Over the years, the store and its owners had figured in many newspaper accounts that promoted the business and the legend of the master tailors who fled their homeland.

Joe, the elder, and Harry, his son, created a phenomenal success story, and every four years, TV-savvy people came through to have their pictures taken with these immigrant entrepreneur stars. Between the papers and the parties and traditional word of mouth, advertising was free. Nevertheless, Harry, unlike his father and more like his great grandpa back home, was a showman as well as a tailor and businessman, and he believed in radio saturation.

Yet despite having the means and status to move uptown, Harry kept the neighbourhood store opened by his grandpa. Since then, of course, the store had expanded horizontally and vertically—substantially in both cases—smoothly transitioned with the help of good friends in the right places.

Harry made a point of greeting and talking to everyone making them feel welcome, special, and, not incidentally, inclined to buy a suit or three. Harry never missed a day, though he wasn't always in the store. He had a multitude of obligations—weddings, funerals, christenings, communions, bar and bat mitzvahs, grand openings, opening ceremonies, and so on and so forth. Wherever a suit was called for, one was likely to be his.

At Trisha's wedding, I remember that Harry gushed over the appearance of the groom and his father, the three younger brothers, the best man, and the ushers. Ruth and I felt strangely pleased that Trisha was our daughter … and only child.

There wasn't a funeral in the neighbourhood that Harry didn't attend. It didn't matter whether the deceased was the postman or a councilman, Harry went out of his way to express his condolences to the family. Instinctively, he would ruminate on how gratified the deceased would be to have such well-attired gentlemen in attendance.

Harry still lived in the old neighbourhood, and we saw him now and again, always impeccably dressed in a fine suit, shopping or just visiting in the stores, going for walks with his dachshund, Tommy, or flying kites in the park with his grand kids. He was one of those fellows who always had time for people. And he was at home anywhere, stopping to chat with neighbours in their front yard or popping into a social club for a card game. He often gave his neighbours, the Wisniewski's, Father Francis' most faithful parishioners, a ride to church. Once he even took Harvey's cat in to be put down. Harvey, the store's longest-serving tailor going back to Harry's father, couldn't bear to do it.

In the neighbourhood, there was a story—probably embellished over the years—about how Harry had long ago prevented a robbery. Two guys were holding up Mr. Kim's convenience store. Actually, I think it was before Mr. Kim—maybe it was Srini or O'Malley before him.. Anyway, Harry was in the store having personally delivered Mr. Kim's (or whoever's) new suit. When he saw the gun, Harry jumped right in. He told the older guy with the gun that he'd never get anywhere or amount to anything unless he learned to show more respect for himself by dressing better. And he added that he owed it to the kid to set a better example. Harry became the target, but just for a moment. Mr. Kim (or whoever) pulled out a baseball bat from under the counter and smashed the wrist holding the gun. Water sprayed all over Harry's suit. Luckily, it was a water pistol. Harry reportedly told the police that it was a good thing he was wearing a spectacular water-resistant suit—just arrived.

Harry is a fixture of my daily commute. Two-three times on the way in to the office and two-four more times on the way home, depending on traffic. Don't know what I'd do if I had to take the subway. Guess I'd have to poke those micro speakers into my brain so I could hear the radio properly. Here's Harry's latest radio ad. It's classic Harry.

"Five days and five days only at the airport convention centre, we're having a fantastic—our largest ever—the city's most gigantic ever—suit sale. Six tractor trailers filled with an unbelievable collection of stunning suits—suits for every man, boy, and child—are arriving now, even as I speak. The selection is fabulous, the prices rock-bottom, and the quality—Harry's. But don't wait, 'cause even though there are thousands and thousands of beautiful suits—gorgeous suits—they're gonna go like hotcakes. They're gonna go like nobody's business."

Can't miss Harry's ads. They're on every station. And they're almost too easy to remember. Stopped at a red light, I sometimes catch myself keeping up with Harry.

I decided I'd better get out there—to the convention centre. I needed a new dark suit, and I always got my suits from Harry. Fabulous selection and rock-bottom prices—trademark Harry. Quality? Well, occasionally an alteration or two was in order to make both sleeves 42 Long, but Harry had the best tailors in town and alterations never came to more than 10 percent. Besides, Harry was such a nice fellow. EVERYBODY said so.

First published in Linguistic Erosion, July 13, 2014.

I was afraid I'd find out it wasn't true, at least not in the way I was thinking. I was also afraid they might think I was just being a silly girl.

I couldn't ask my older brother and sister. They'd make fun of me. It doesn't help any that they tease me in front of other kids. Daddy's too busy buying, selling and fixing up old houses. Mama's the only one I can ask about things. Besides, I know she knows, cause she's a doctor.

My teacher thinks I'm real lucky to have doctor mom, but at recess and lunch, I hear the kids laughing at her — the way she does her hair in a bun, her fuddy-duddy clothes, the way she walks, like she's got a book balanced on her head, and that old, old car she drives. Sure can't talk to her. That's all I need is to be a teacher's pet.

I heard about it the first time at the makeup counter in Macy's. Ellen took me — she had to — and she made me spend three hours shopping ... for her. The lady behind the counter was a chatterbox, Ellen said. She talked about one thing then another til my head was spinning like a top. Reminded me of Aunt Vivienne who was fussy about the way people said her name. Russ called her Aunt Vivi-End — not to her face of course — and he and Ellen laughed out loud about that. I didn't get it. Still don't.

She said something real interesting — the lady at the counter did. I asked Mama about it that night, cause I thought if anybody would know she would. Like I said, she's a doctor and they're supposed to know all that kind of stuff.

I told her I wanted to be different ... so that people wouldn't pick on me. She told me the same old thing.

"There's nothing wrong with you, Amy. You're a beautiful little girl, you're healthy as a horse, and you're very bright."

"I know Mama. You always say that."

"You're my daughter, so, of course it's true. I've told you before, and I meant it then and I mean it now. So, what's this about your wanting to be different?"

"But is it possible?" I asked.

"Is what possible, darling?"

"Can someone be different, like become different?"

"There are lots of ways people change as they grow up. Boys and girls become men and women— "

"I'm not talking about that," I said.

"What then, dear?"

"Well, me and Ellen — uh, Ellen and I — were in Macy's and this lady at the makeup counter was talking about how everybody gets new skin every seven years. The old skin cells die and get replaced and after seven years, the skin's all new."

"Well … yes, there's some truth to that, but how does that—"

"I was thinking if I had new skin, I might look different. And if I looked different, maybe I wouldn't get teased and made fun of."

"Umh, I'm not sure— "

"If I could speed it up, and maybe change some things."

"What do you mean, honey? What do you want to change?"

"Like this mole on my face. You and Daddy call it a beauty mark, but nobody as school says that. And these freckles. Shirley says I look like I've got the measles. And my hair. Why does it have to be so red? The boys in the playground chant '9-1-1, fire on the head, 9-1-1, fire on the head.'"

"Are they still doing that? I spoke to the principal, and he said he would put a stop to it."

"That doesn't help, cause then the boys know I've told on them and get even meaner."

"Well, Amy, I know you'll find this really hard to believe, but one day you'll be extremely proud of your lovely red hair and not all people are lucky enough to have freckles. You know your father and I first met in a huge crowd of people at a college protest, and it was my fiery red hair that first attracted him."

"But why can't I have Daddy's hair? It's so ordinary. Nobody bothers people with his color hair."

"I know what you mean, but let's keep it our little secret, huh?"

"OK."

"Oh, I almost forgot. I have a new patient. Actually, it's a family that just moved here, and the little girl is your age, and she doesn't know anybody. I was wondering how you'd feel about walking her

to and from school — just until she gets settled in. Their house is right on the way, about three blocks from us. She's very attractive and intelligent, just like you. And she has a good sense of humor. She made me chuckle once or twice."

"I guess so."

"There's one more thing. Vanessa is in a wheelchair. She had a riding accident a couple of years ago. She's had a difficult time, but she's a strong young lady, kinda like you, Amy, and she's learned how to play the flute and paint with watercolors. But she's still quite lonely, and I thought you might— "

"OK, Mama, but I'm doing it for you."

"I know you are, sweetheart."

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine*, Issue 4, June 2014.

The other day I discovered a curious 1970s artifact stored away in a dark, dusty corner of a virtual bank vault somewhere on the Internet. It wasn't really a discovery so much as a happening upon something, sort of like "discovering" a well polished rock on a deserted beach at the end of the tourist season. What I happened upon was the 30-year-old record of a debate between Milt and Mo about the money machine. At the time of their debate, the money machine was breaking down, and the importance attached to fixing the machine was suggested by a new index—the "misery index," the sum of inflation and unemployment.

Now Milt and Mo were really important people, and of course the money machine is a really important apparatus that keeps the lifeblood of modern commerce circulating. Milt and Mo knew important things, and they knew that it was known that they knew important things and that what they knew was beyond what most of us know or could reasonably hope to know, and so when they debated, they knew there were a lot of people listening.

Because at the time the money machine was functioning erratically and causing panic in the crowd, and because both Milt and Mo were highly credible, people did listen. What people were listening for was how to get out of the mess and how to avoid it. The sought-after solutions were practical in nature, but underlying them were fundamental and fundamentally accessible assumptions, which persist today in the contemporary variants of Milt and Mo's money machine mechanics.
Milt believed in putting the money machine on irreversible autopilot. Of course, there's no such thing as an irreversible governor, but the intent was to discourage fiddling with the money machine. Milt was a lovely person, but he had a theoretical and heretofore unfalsified lack of confidence in human competence and integrity. So he be-

lieved that the money machine, which was a discovery of rare genius and positive value, would be most efficient if set at a constant speed relative to the long run trend rate of economic growth. Any rapid acceleration or deceleration would increase the wear and tear and lead to inevitable machine breakdown.

Mo, on the other hand, believed in keeping the money machine in manual mode with a designated knob twiddler watching and intervening with great care and wisdom. Milt facetiously commented that he would support knob twiddling as long as Mo was the knob twiddler, the implication being that this approach did not lend itself to law-like regularity and so the probability of human "*mis*intervention" would be very high. As it turns out, a recent governor of the money machine, Mr. Greenback, may have been the consummate knob twiddler, effectively fine tuning the money machine and smoothing the cycle of upswings and downturns, even winning the praise of a sceptical Milt. For his part, Mo was convinced that while there were times when the money machine needed to be manually guided through particularly difficult phases of the business cycle, fail-safes, beyond discretionary human control, could be built into the machine to prevent it from going out of control.

Today, 30 years later, the world is filled with hybrid knob twiddler-auto pilots who run the money machines the world over. They are highly educated, well intentioned, removed from the distractions of fractious politics, and capable of judiciously balancing multiple conflicting interests. They understand the limits of (others') human knowledge. They understand the weakness of (others') human nature. They promote the superiority of (their) expertise in resolving public policy disputes. They profess scientific objectivity in pursuit of good governance. They proclaim the practical imperative that the good of the many exceeds the sacrifice of the few. Finally, they bring order and predictability, as governors of the money machines, into a world otherwise characterized by conflict and uncertainty.

Now that's what you'd call progress! Some believe that with the Milt & Mo neo-synthesis we have reached the End of Economics. Now, wouldn't that be nice?

First published in Through the Gaps, July 6, 2014.

I was taking my lunch on the Common, and I overheard a conversation. Normally, I don't eavesdrop, but I have this new cell phone with a stealth sound amplifier, and I really wanted to try it outdoors.

It was incredible! I could hear everything ... 50 feet away! On a bench facing the fountain was an old couple. He was snoring and she was muttering something to the pigeons. A young woman was chasing three little boys who were chasing geese and then being chased by the geese. Then, there were these two ... from the college it looked like.

One spoke agitatedly. He was a graduate student ... in Philosophy and Neurophysiology. The other one had that professorial look about him — elbow patches, bifocals hanging around his neck, wispy white hair and a raspy baritone.

"Brain in the vat," I heard quite clearly, and that got my attention. I'd studied it when I sat in on one of those night school courses you see advertised in the subway. Sounded like mad science sci-fi not Philosophy, but all us guys in the class thought it was kinda cool — in theory. What if the 'external world' IS created by our minds or brains and what if we could create one of our own choosing?

"We have to do this. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," said the student.

"It has to be carefully thought out. We can't be rash and take needless risks," said the professor.
"But you said yourself, Professor, there's never been a better time."

"Granted, modern medical technology will ensure that the experiment is painless and reversible, at least in theory."

"And even if something goes wrong — God forbid, um, sorry Professor — it will be impossible to prove— "

"Ethically, we are beyond reproach. Legally, we will be beyond reach. National security's on our side, too."

"That's a double-edged sword though. I still have to defend my dissertation and to do that I have to go public."

"And I still think I, uh, we, have a shot at the Nobel. We just have to work out the details."

As they talked, I recalled the image of a human brain being surgically extracted and placed in a vat where it sucked in nutrients and then was subjected to endless combinations and permutations of electronic impulses. I'd had to write a paper from the brain's point of view, but I couldn't get past the images that the envatted brain would never know. I flunked.

"We still thinking along the same lines then?" the student asked.

"They deliver the subject. We conduct our experiments and give them their results. Then we experiment on a second subject — a chimpanzee brain would work — so we can publish our research. We can use the results as long as we don't mention the first experiments."
"Do you really think they'll go along, Professor?"

"Absolutely. According to the Director and the Chairman, they need this, but for the time being they have to fly under the radar, so to speak."

"Do we have a schedule?"

"End of the month," answered the professor. "Everything and everyone should be in place. Of course, we'll never know where ... ever."

"Should we meet again before then?"

"No, We'll be contacted."

"Did you hear something ... from over there?"

"That direction?" the professor said, pointing in my vicinity. "I thought I heard it earlier, too."

"Sounded like feedback from a cheap amplifying device."

"Hey, it wasn't cheap," I said under my breath, not cluing in.

"I'd better phone it in," said the professor. "It's probably nothing, but it might be one of those needless risks that could screw this up for us unless we eliminate it."

Eliminate. Needless risk. Screw up. That's ME they're talking about! I slipped over the back of the bench, got up but ran low to the ground all the way to the subway entrance.
No black SUVs, no men in black. On the northbound platform, all was clear ... until the Peter Gunn theme startled me. It was just my ringtone, but it was so LOUD underground. I didn't answer. "Brian, Inuvit." Northwest Territories, really?

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Library Magazine*, Issue 5, July 2014.

When 'Bri-an, In-u-vit' showed up on my cell phone display, I thought it was a wrong number. Probably an American in the Northwest Territories. Then, a sinister interpretation got my attention.

This wasn't geographic illiteracy. This was intentional. After what I'd overhead in the Common, 'Bri-an, In-u-vit' was without a doubt a simply-coded message for 'Brain in a vat.' That meant they were on to me. What's worse, they wanted me to know it.

When the subway train arrived, I stepped back to let people on and off, and as the doors were closing, I tossed my cell in — my brand new cell with the stealth sound amplifier. Gone too, was the recorded conversation in the park. My ringtone went off again, and a colorfully tattooed teenager held my phone up to his unpierced ear — actually his only ear. The train was pulling out, but his eyes met mine, and I immediately took off to get street level, snatching an old man's Red Sox cap as I catapulted up the down escalator.

They had to have pictures of me by now with all the CCTV cameras downtown, so I ducked into a barber shop with an American flag on the barber pole and got a serviceman's special.

Down the street at a thrift store, I picked up some jeans, a reversible jacket, some grease paint, and a pair of aviator sunglasses. Not unexpectedly, my rushed job applying the grease paint in the tiny thrift store washroom was splotchy up close and I forgot my hands, but as long as I kept my hands in my pockets, it was passable.

For a moment, I felt sorry for the kid who thought he'd hit the jackpot with my phone, but it passed. I had bigger worries.

My apartment. They'd be waiting. My roommate. Too late. She'd never believe me anyway. I couldn't warn anybody. My father in the Saint John Fire Department back home and my sister, a medic in Afghanistan. They wouldn't go after first responders, would they? God, what kind of hell had I fallen into?

Out on the sidewalk in the bright sun, I could have sworn the subway entrance was surrounded by black SUVs and men in black with bad haircuts, like mine. And the marquee across the street read "The Life of Brian." Obviously a taunt. Everybody knew Monty Python was dead.

Having escaped the hot zone, it occurred to me that once they had the kid and the phone, they wouldn't need me and they'd stop chasing me. Without the audio, I'd be just another wacko conspiracy theorist. I mean, who's gonna believe a brain can be taken out of a living person, kept alive in a vat, tested by tens of thousands of electrical impulses, and then reinserted? Really?

"Hey buddy, sidewalk's closed. There's construction overhead. How'd you get through the barricade?"

It took a firm hand on my shoulder to stop me. The words — I didn't think he'd been talking to me. Would've been ironic I suppose if a steel beam had fallen on my head.

Maybe not, going back to my original train of thought. Maybe they wouldn't stop chasing me if they found the teen and my cell phone. How hard would it be ... to create an accident? Wouldn't it make sense to tie up all the loose ends?

Meanwhile, if I had a good option, I sure couldn't think of it. Not a chance of happening on a futuristic laser weapon to neutralize the bad guys like in a cheap video game. Pity this wasn't fiction.

The sudden simultaneous slamming of heavy car doors jolted me back to the here and now. It happened behind me, but I didn't dare turn and look. I ran, turned a corner, zigzagged through overflowing dumpsters in a urine-soaked alley, ran through several narrow backyards, climbed a balcony and looked out on an empty apartment.

Crashed on the living floor, I followed the lines on the ceiling that evidenced numerous floods. All around things looked pretty normal, in a low-income sort of way. Must be awful to live without ever knowing when it's gonna happen again though. In a dry corner, safely distant from the ceiling stains, was a computer ... a fairly new model and likely hooked up to the Internet. That's when I remembered that the default setting on my phone automatically uploaded pictures. Maybe audio, too.

If they hadn't already found it, I could download the files and go to the *Globe* or *Times* or somebody. The system came up fast and was ready and waiting while I scrambled around trying to find a flash drive. The audio was there. I knew they would be tracking access, so I spoofed the IP address and downloaded as fast as I could.

There wouldn't be sirens, so I couldn't count on a warning. The grease paint came off slowly. I dabbed on some rouge, put on a dirty blonde wig and a beige turtleneck, dumped my stuff in the garbage chute, and left by the elevator. Sure enough there were two black SUVs parked out front with a woman in the passenger seat scanning the grounds and building with a telephoto lens.

Bernie, an overweight beagle, put in my charge by the nearsighted Mrs. Pritchard who thought I was Brigit, gave me cover and an excuse to change directions and walk away. A few blocks later, I

handed the leash over to a dog walker who seemed equally capable of managing six as five.

Yet again, I had escaped their net, though as I was making my circuitous way to the newspaper, I sensed that a much bigger net was about to drop.

First published in *Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine*, Issue 5, July 2014.

Nguyen, known as Win, had lived in a small town on the outskirts of Halifax for nearly two years. He had work in the city, friends, and life was pretty good. His English, however, was still poor, he felt—native fluency being his standard. So, he took advantage of every opportunity to improve his English, and being a gregarious person, there were lots.

Early on, some of the locals sniggered. Win wasn't stupid, and he knew he was the butt of many silly jokes, but he didn't care. Over time, his persistence won over even the surliest, old postmaster Ferguson, and the burliest, Chief Taggert. A quick study, Win got to where he could verbally diagram sentences during conversations, and this impressed a few, then intimidated some more, and ultimately annoyed everyone. He kept on doing it but only in his head.

At the office, one of the favourite topics to bitch about was telemarketers. Hang-ups and call screening were the common solutions. Win used to be polite, but now he hung up, too. Tony had tried bullying, but it took a lot more effort than he'd imagined, so he gave up. Ian had just set up a business line with a pay-per-call service and was collecting 10 cents a minute for telemarketing calls. Shelagh, the English expert with a Master's from Dalhousie, exasperated at playing thesaurus, got the messianic idea that Win should practice on telemarketers.

It was genius! In the evening, Win set up a dummy online account with a luring marketing profile—a St. Mary's undergrad working two jobs—and waited … but not long.

"Good evening, is Mr. N-GOO-YEN there?"

"Call me Win."

"Thank you, Mr. Win. We understand you have an excellent credit rating, and you're just the type of individual that qualifies for our new platinum double plus card."

"You mean 'who?'"

"'Who?' I'm sorry sir, I don't follow."

"You said 'the type of individual that.' Shouldn't it be 'the type of individual who?'"

"Sure. If you like. But you do know what I meant, right?"

"With that—uh, what's the word—oh yeah, clarification. With that clarification, I get it. Can I phrase it that way?"

"Yes, you may Mr. Win, but—"

"Wouldn't 'subject to that clarification' sound better?"

"Absolutely sir, but I'd like to get back to the—"

"Excuse me, please. I have one more question. What does this 'double plus' mean?"

"It means the highest level."

"Excuse me. Just one more question, please. Wouldn't it be clearer—or is it 'more clear'—“

"Either way, sir."

"—to say 'peak platinum' or 'pinnacle platinum' instead of 'platinum double plus'?"

"It's just a name, eh?"

"Ah, okay. So, is this card better than a Visa gold card? Or, an MNBA or MNFL card? And platinum, is that really the best card, because platinum isn't the most expensive—"

"Sir, I really don't know. But sir—uh, Mr. Win—I'm running out of time for this call, so if you don't mind I'd really like to get back to the reason I called."

"Yes. Yes. But could, uh, would you first give me some feedback? You see I'm practicing my English— my conversational English— and I'd appreciate— Hello?"

First published in Linguistic Erosion, November 10, 2013.

Wanna see a modern-day miracle, kid?

Whatever.

Well, just sit tight.

Sure. It's not like I'm going anywhere.

Here, take the binoculars. See that old guy on the bridge? Orange raincoat, red baseball cap, using a cane? Over there, to the left of the first tower. Can't miss him.

Yeah.

Well, that guy's got demons.

What are you talking about?

Just pay attention. He's possessed—probably doesn't even know it—and I'm gonna release him.

Demons? What, like the Exorcist? That's crazy.

Think so? Watch this. I'll send him a wireless message. If he starts and jumps around or falls down or something bizarre like that, we'll know for sure.

Know what?

That he's got demons and must be—
No way.

Removed.

How? He's gotta be a half-mile away.

Easy. Remote control. I can make him hop onto the railing then fling himself off the bridge.

Why would you do that? He could be killed.

Nobody's gonna die today. There's a net. All I'm gonna do is send the old guy over the edge.

What if the net doesn't—

It will.

So what's the miracle?

Ever hear the story of Legion—the Gadarene devils—the herd of swine run off the cliff into the sea?

No.

Didn't your parents send you to Sunday school?

My adopted parents are— Hey! Look! The old man's falling. There's another … and another. There are two together, a man and a woman, holding hands.

All possessed … obviously.

Oh God, look! They're hitting the water. But you said—

That's impossible! There IS a net. I saw it.

You gotta call 9-1-1! You can't leave those people. They might still be alive.

OK, OK. Relax.

Hello. Yes, this is an emergency. I just witnessed four—no, five—people jump off the bridge. The suicide net— It's NOT a suicide net. Painting and repairs!? Oh shit! No, I'm too far away and it happened so fast. My name? Sorry (static) losing (static)—

Why did do that?

Do what?

That static stuff.

Cause they don't really need my name. Besides we're leaving now.

What about—

In the car. Now! Let's go!

Do you really think all those people have demons?

Don't be stupid. Demons are fictions. These people had unsecure devices in their bodies.

What do you mean 'unsecure devices?'
Pacemakers, retinal implants, neural implants, cochlear implants—all kinds of medical implants, and all accessible wirelessly—

You can hack into them? Is that what you did? You hacked into that old man's pacemaker?

You’re pretty quick, kid. Now just lie down in the backseat and keep— That a smartwatch … with GPS?

First published in 365 tomorrows, December 26, 2013.

Roaches. We were simply called "roaches," though perhaps even then we should have been called "cockroaches." Our tradition is that only the male figures into historical accounts. The progenitor of our species, Ed, lived googol^{googol} generations ago. In the beginning, he was there in the Garden of Eden, notwithstanding the apocryphal accounts of people.

In the garden, Ed hovered about openly on the lookout for crumbs and dribbles. Back then, there were no cupboards to hide in and no sudden bright lights to skitter away from. And we weren't afflicted with the demeaning stereotype propagated by bigoted speciesists, like K. So, in the beginning, Adam and Eve were pretty relaxed with Ed around, and Ed, for his part, was usually pretty good about not crawling on their naked bodies when they were following God's detailed instructions on how to make Cain and Abel.

Things were ideal – they'd never been better. On the other hand, since there was no comparison, some detractors point out that they'd never been worse. Ed, the father of our race, was an optimist, though. From him, we learned that a crumb under foot is better than—

That part has always puzzled us. Even our intellectuals are baffled. Anyway, Ed, regarded as Methuselah by generations of his progeny, who were also his contemporaries, promised that through his descendants he would live forever, come hell or high water. Noah gave us a helping hand on the high water thing, albeit unwittingly, and it's received wisdom among Adam's and Eve's offspring that we—alone—will survive hell.

Back to the story.

It was a perfect world. Absolutely perfect. Better than Malibu. Then one day, Eve got a little tired and bored with the straight and narrow and scampered over to the apple tree, which was a no-no.

Ed followed. Of course, Winston was there and he wooed and wowed Eve and persuaded her to squeeze the apple hard and drink the liquid. You have to remember that Adam and Eve were bigger and stronger, and even better looking, than people today. Lots more body hair and a wonderfully sloped forehead. Squeezing the juice out of an apple by hand was no big deal. But their brains were still mostly dormant. So even though Eve and Adam looked to the heavens for guidance, Eve didn't register the anomaly of the rumbling in the clouds when she had her first swallow. Ed, too, was in the moment. From his perspective, this was sweet.

Eve took another apple – just one. The abundance of food meant that Adam and Eve didn't have to worry about hunting and gathering and storing. Every day, the items on the menu just fell into place—literally. Survival-type skills were a thing of the future, which itself was a thing of the future, since everything was now.

Eve wrung the apple until it was dry pulp and put the juice in a huge banana leaf. She carried it to Adam, who was very thirsty by late afternoon, having lain in the hot sun for hours, not comprehending why his skin was red and burning. Ed was there, too. He was still hanging around, although, by this point, he was bloated – as big as the mouse Eve was finally going to meet tomorrow morning.

Adam loved the apple juice, and Eve offered to get more, but Adam suggested that they practice their instructions first. At the crucial step in their instructions, there was a really scary clap of thunder, and a brilliant flash of lightening hit something over in the direction of the apple tree.

Shelter. Instincts kicked in. Ed led the way, wobbling along on his several spindly legs. The cave was dark and, in that respect, comforting, but it smelled awful.

So profoundly was our forefather shaken by the almighty bolt of fire and explosive crash that a new genetic trait was born. To this day, even I, an agnostic, dart for a crevice, a corner, or a sliver of dark when the kitchen light flicks on in the middle of the night.

First published in Garden of Eden Anthology, ed. Allen Taylor, February 6, 2014.

Once upon a time, at the centre of the universe.

#

"Pizza looks delicious, hon!"

"It's from that new pizza place, The Very Best Pizza on the Planet. Down the street from the office."

"Catchy name. VB-POP, VibbiePOP. Hm, must be tough to write a jingle for that."

"This the one with the cheese in the crust, Mom?"

"You got it. And four different kinds of meat and double cheese. Thought we'd splurge. Signed a new client today."

"That's wonderful, honey. Could you pass the parmesan, please?"

"And there's more. He's got connections at city hall."

"Think he could help us with the property in the port lands?"

"That's exactly what I'm hoping—though I have to—"

"Of course. That's terrific news. Anything I can do, let me know."

"Thanks dear."

"So, Tony 'sup?"

"Jeez Dad. Promise you won't ever say that in public."

"Alright, let's see. What did you do in school this week? Better?"

"Slightly. Nothin. We didn't do nothin worth talkin about."

"Anything."

"OK, Mom. Anything."

"Nothing of value in history or math or science, not even in science fiction or current events? Hon, remind me, what's our ROI in this school?"

"Your what?"

"He's a teenager, dear. And Tony, son, just humour your father."

"OK, here's something. There's this tribe of pygmies, like somewhere in Africa or South America, I don't know. Nobody knew about them til one day a plane flew over. The pilot said they got attacked by a swarm of little brown people throwing spears."

"Sounds familiar, hey hon?"

"Mr. MacGuffin, our teacher, said it was a shame, since the people on the plane were most probably planning to bring electricity, running water, medicine and other stuff to the people."
"What a charming touch. You know your old man thought about doing stuff like that. With the Peace Corps, way back before your Mom and I met, hey hon?"

"Still can't picture you doing the B.C. thing in Afghanistan or wherever it was."

"It was just a silly, romantic idea … and like acne I outgrew it."

"And like Sally?"

"Who's Sally?"

"Just someone I knew in college. We were in the same civil engineering program. After she joined Green—"

"Yes, dear. That's ancient history now, isn't it? Now you're in commercial real estate not Save the World. Here, have another slice."

"Thanks, hon."

"You're welcome, dear. Tony, you?"

"Yeah—I mean, Yes ma'am—I'd definitely like another piece, please."

"And I'll have the last one. Not counting points tonight."

"Oh, and son—um, Tony—your mother and I have to go out this evening. We'll be back pretty late, so lock up and turn off all the lights, will you? There's a good boy."
"Tony, have I ever told you what a good son you are?"

"Mom? What's up? Dad?"

"Your mother's having a family moment, son. Mother's do that. It's what makes them special."

"Well, dear I guess we'd better be leaving. Can't be late."

"No, that wouldn't do. Okay son, we're counting on you to hold down the fort. Yudeh man."

#

Way out beyond the edges of the Milky Way, the launch sequence is underway.

Long envied for its proximity to the Sun, the blue planet, whose surface and atmosphere are unsuitable for the Great Species, will be pulverized to make room for a massive sunning rock.

Once the debris field has cleared, time-shares will be auctioned to the most lethal bidders.

First published in Farther Stars Than These, May 29, 2014.

Jan here was depicted by the author as “a thief with filthy habits and a murderer, too if only he had the backbone.” Claims that ever since he was created, he ain't been able to find work anywhere's else. Is it any wonder with a reference like that? A right just grievance, our Jan has, if you ask me. Do ye concur?

Bad as that is, what the penman done to him, he done ten times worse to some of us. Ain't that so brethren and sisterns?

It's truer than you say, old man. The master wrote me down as a gluttonous and perverted moneylender, but—now hold on, hold, let me finish—I'm none of those things, except in his fiction. But you make my point for me. YOU see me as what he created, not what I can be. “Even Shylock would be disgusted by his vile depravity,” that's my reference. So, who do you think is gonna give me a chance for another role? I'm branded, tainted, imprisoned in a plaster cast.

Aye. Maybe what he says is true, but I wouldn't borrow the time of day from im, and I sure wouldn't have im in my house with my wife and younguns, and if I ever seen im in their company I'd kill im.

Mine is ten times worse. I figured prominently in the opening pages of the writer's so-called apocryphal history. It was 18th century France, and he had me play the villain—though I didn't get to enjoy any of the villainy, only the punishment. For three brutal pages, I was drawn and quartered, and my organs were carved out of my belly and thrust in my face so I could witness the progress of my own death. It was gruesome even for those times. The author achieved notoriety and became a minor celebrity. But I was condemned to the world of Hollywood slashers. So, I'm like Sisyphus, only I get cut up and put back together again, endlessly.

Oi. Least you come off looking sort of respectable. I mean people pity you. I'd settle for that. Just look at this face. This unibrow. Who you think's gonna give me a role as some super smart scientist or even an office worker or somethin like that? Or who's gonna let me get the girl—the good looking one, not the one that looks like my sister? Nobody. Cause of the writer I got these looks and nothing I can do.

So, why are we sittin round complaining? Let's get the bastard? Thanks to him, I got dementia, and boy, wouldn't I like to give him a piece of my mind.

Thought you said you lost your mind, old man?

No, you cheeky little snot, but how'd you like to lose those last couple of teeth?

Hey. Easy. Everybody listen up. This isn't the way to settle our grievances. We gotta keep our eyes on the road—

Oi. You mean, 'ball,' don't you stupid?

If I'd meant 'ball,' I'd have said 'ball.' It's a mixed metaphor, and 'stupid' is not a word for you to use, it's a word for others to use when talking to or about you.

Who the f—

Quiet! Hear that? He's back, and he's watching us.

Let's do it! It's now or never. Get him!

#

Nurse, how long was I out?

Three days, and we're very glad to have you back.

Did I say anything?

No, but a couple of times you looked like you were struggling very hard against something.

Nurse, one more thing before you go. There's a book here with a note: “Could you make it out to us?” I don't remember writing this book.

Your latest, your friends said. They stopped by and left it for you to autograph when you came to.

Friends?

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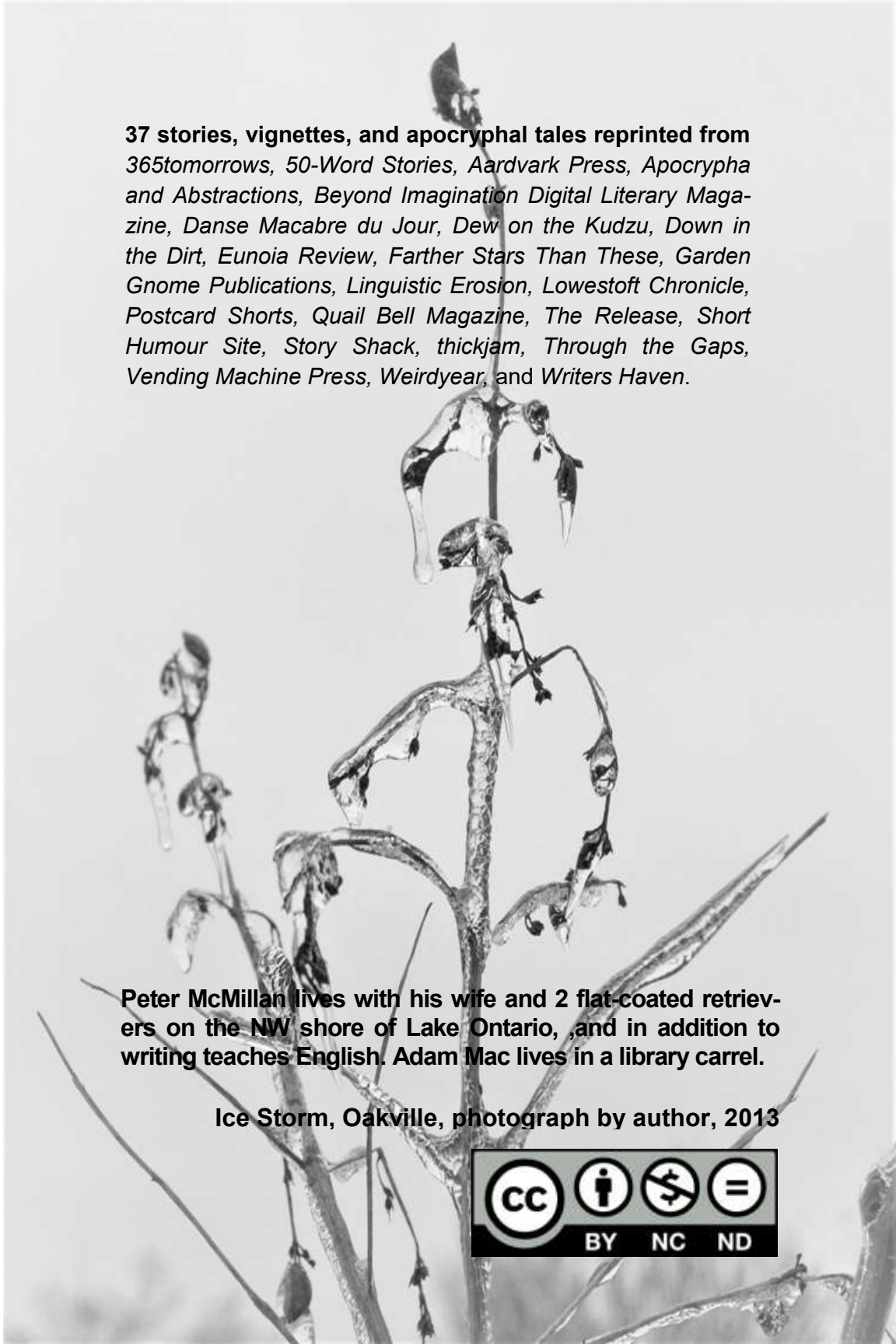
37 stories, vignettes, and apocryphal tales reprinted from *365tomorrows, 50-Word Stories, Aardvark Press, Apocrypha and Abstractions, Beyond Imagination Digital Literary Magazine, Danse Macabre du Jour, Dew on the Kudzu, Down in the Dirt, Eunoia Review, Farther Stars Than These, Garden Gnome Publications, Linguistic Erosion, Lowestoft Chronicle, Postcard Shorts, Quail Bell Magazine, The Release, Short Humour Site, Story Shack, thickjam, Through the Gaps, Vending Machine Press, Weirdyear,* and *Writers Haven*.



Peter McMillan lives with his wife and 2 flat-coated retrievers on the NW shore of Lake Ontario, ,and in addition to writing teaches English. Adam Mac lives in a library carrel.

Ice Storm, Oakville, photograph by author, 2013

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